

Iran blocks US 'virtual embassy'

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday blocked an Internet website the United States was touting as a "virtual embassy," and which senior MPs slammed as an attempt to deceive the Iranian people and divide them from the government.

The address, <http://iran.usembassy.gov/>, was inaccessible inside Iran, instead showing a message in Farsi saying: "In accordance with computer crime laws, access to this website is not possible."

Other websites Iran's authorities find objectionable have also long been blocked, including Facebook, non-English Google sites and many foreign media pages.

Alaeddin Borujerdi, the head of the Iranian parliamentary national security and foreign policy commission, said the new US website was a misguided attempt to make the Iranian people believe Washington wanted to communicate with them.

"The opening of the virtual embassy by the US is a new deception by the Great Satan," he said, according to the parliamentary news agency.

"The Iranian nation will not be fooled by this deception," he said.

Talks restart

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"I did have an introductory meeting with the new minister for communications. We did have some preliminary discussions, but there is nothing new to report right now," Goldstein told journalists after the meeting.

"It was an introductory meeting to begin exchanging views as part of the ongoing dialogue. The discussion will continue further after I return from my upcoming trip to my headquarters at Washington DC," she told The Daily Star.

Goldstein is flying to Washington tomorrow. There she will discuss with the bank's high officials the latest government move, among other things, a WB official in Dhaka told this correspondent on condition of anonymity.

The trip to Washington is part of the regular schedule, Goldstein said, adding, "When I get back, we hope we'll have further dialogue on the Padma bridge."

Shafiqul Islam, project director of the Padma Multipurpose Bridge, Khandaker Anwarul Islam, secretary of the Bridge Division and Abdul Wadud, chief engineer of the Bridge Division, were present at the meeting.

Khandaker Anwarul, quoting Goldstein, said all the four donors -- WB, ADB, IDB and Jica -- were working to resolve the current crisis over the funding.

After the meeting with the communications minister, Goldstein also had a one-to-one meeting with Finance Minister AMA Muhith at Hotel Sonargaon where they both went to attend a programme of the ADB.

In September, the WB temporarily suspended its \$1.2 billion fund for the \$2.9b project. In the same month the bank handed over a letter to Muhith raising allegations of corruption against Abul and his family firm Sahco in the bridge's tender process.

Government officials had earlier said the WB "unofficially signaled" to the government that it would not fund the project if Abul Hossain remained in the communications ministry.

Abul had all along maintained his innocence, saying on one occasion that he was a "proven honest man".

Following the suspension, the date for WB's loan activation was extended till the end of January next year.

Finance ministry officials said yesterday the government was trying to solve the "complexity" over the funding by the deadline.

Also yesterday, Muhith at a programme at the Bangabandhu International Conference Centre said he hoped that the "complication regarding the Padma bridge funding will be over soon".

World warned

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treaty for curbing dangerous greenhouse gases.

Meanwhile, Canadian Environment Minister Peter Kent yesterday urged the international community to turn the page on the Kyoto Protocol and to build a global climate solution around a series of agreements reached last year in Cancun.

Plunging into the debate, Ban called for Kyoto to be kept alive and scheduled meetings yesterday with the big players. "While Kyoto alone will not solve today's climate problems, it is a foundation to build on with important institutions. It provides the framework that markets sorely need. ... It is important that we do not create a vacuum."

Kyoto's death would leave a toxic legacy among developing countries, which see the treaty as a totem of solidarity between rich and poor, and leave the UNFCCC with only a voluntary approach for taming carbon emissions.

Kyoto's first round of emissions pledges expires next year. But these promises apply only to rich countries, not developing ones, nor do they concern the United States, which boycotted Kyoto in 2001.

Rich Kyoto countries are refusing to sign on for fresh commitments, saying this would be unfair if far bigger emitters, accounting for more than half of all carbon pollution, get off the hook.

Chances of a deal lie in a proposal made by the European Union, which has offered to sign up for a second round of commitments in return for a "roadmap" to a new, legally binding pact encompassing the big carbon polluters, notably China and the United States.

Hopes of movement were

raised on Sunday when China signalled willingness - linked with conditions -- to embrace a future binding accord after 2020.

But on Tuesday, optimism faded.

Canada has been publicly and privately criticised by other countries at the conference for refusing to support extending the Kyoto agreement beyond 2013 by accepting a new round of commitments.

"We must be fair if we are to be effective," Montreal Gazette quoted Environment Minister Kent as saying. "That is why for Canada, the Kyoto Protocol is not where the solution lies -- it is an agreement that covers fewer than 30 percent of global emissions. Kyoto, for Canada, is in the past."

He noted that the Cancun Agreements cover three quarters of global emissions, twice as much as those with targets under Kyoto. Kyoto agreement is not effective or as comprehensive as all of the Cancun agreements which established a new framework for preventing dangerous human interference with the atmosphere.

Delegates have also been angered by rumours, neither confirmed nor denied by Kent, that the federal government plans to formally withdraw from the treaty after the conference, the Canadian website added.

The speech was momentarily disrupted when a small group of Canadian youth at the conference stood up and turned their backs to Kent from the rear of the room. Wearing white T-shirts with the words "people before polluters," and "turn your back on Canada," they were escorted out by security to applause as Kent continued his address.

I'm not after money

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construction of the bridge, which I think can be overcome," he added.

"I am feeling the huge pressure of expectation. Time is short but expectations and challenges are immense. There are also fund constraints," he said, adding that he would fix his priorities and work to fulfil people's expectations as much as possible.

People are suffering because of the bad condition of roads, culverts and bridges. "I will try to reduce their sufferings," said Quader, who was at the secretariat after about a decade.

Evaluating the performance of the communications ministry, he said, "Ambition is high but implementation is very slow."

Quader said he did not wish to deal with party issues at his ministry office and turn his ministry into a party office. He suggested that everyone should talk about party issues at his home.

"We have pledged to work as a team to face the challenges and engage our full efforts to fulfil the Herculean task which the prime minister has bestowed upon me," he said.

Asked how he would do his job since there were a number of self-confessed corrupt people in his ministry, Quader said there is a separate institution to look into the matter. "I don't want to dwell on the past...I want to take lessons from the past."

About some large but stalled projects that are aimed at improving the capital's congestion problem, he said he would sit with his officials to look into the matter.

Earlier in the morning, Quader joined the ministry two days after he was given charge of the ministry. Today he is scheduled to see for himself the construction work of turning the Dhaka-Chittagong highway into a dual carriageway.

In a major reshuffle of the cabinet, the government on Monday replaced Syed Abul Hossain with Quader as communications minister. **SURANJIT** Suranjit Sengupta, the newly appointed railways minister, yesterday promised to make the railway modern and dynamic.

"To provide service to people is a challenging job. So each and every officer and

employee of the sector should discharge his or her duties sincerely," he told journalists as he took charge of his ministry.

The veteran Awami League leader was given the Ministry of Railways after being sworn in as a cabinet minister on November 28 along with Quader.

"Local and international conspirators put the railway into the road sector. Now I have to reconstruct the railway sector to infuse dynamism," he said, adding, "It is not enough to make plans and programmes... everyone has to work sincerely for implementation of the plans and development projects."

The minister noted that the railway needed more locomotives, carriages, and manpower for its development.

Terming the railway a service sector, he stressed the need for maintaining the time schedule of trains. "For this we need to work sincerely."

Ban slapped

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Bela's counsel Iqbal Kabir Lytton said the Rajdhani Nyunyan Kartipakkha (Rajuk) informed the court that it had already sent copies of a list of unauthorised housing projects to print and electronic media so that the media keep from running their advertisement.

The HC in a rule on June 8 declared 73 private housing projects in and around the capital illegal and ordered immediate halt to their activities, including sales of plots and earth filling, and removal of their ads and signboards.

The court on that day also issued a rule upon the government to explain why its failure to stop the advertisements of illegal housing projects should not be declared unlawful and against public interest.

The government, however, did not make any reply to the rule, Iqbal Kabir told the Daily Star, adding that Rajuk then furnished the court with a list of illegal housing projects.

Rajuk documents show that it only approved 24 private housing projects in and around the capital before the Private Housing Project Land Development Rules, 2004 came into effect.

BDR chief

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first day of the February 25-26 mutiny.

Most of the 57 senior and mid-rank army officers, including Shakil, were killed in and around the Darbar hall hours after the mutiny broke out. The rebels also killed Shakil's wife and 16 others in Pilkhana.

Lt Col Maksudul Haque, commanding officer of 7 Battalion of Border Guard Bangladesh, yesterday gave a deposition at Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court as the ninth witness in the BDR carnage case.

The officer told the court that he was a major at BDR Comilla Sector at that time, and went to Pilkhana to receive a medal for his role in combating border smuggling.

He said there was chaos inside the Darbar Hall, as some jawans shouted "Jago" in the hall after a gunshot outside.

The DG ordered all to sit down. But the jawans started to move out of the hall, breaking its windowpanes as they did so. Maksudul then heard more gunshots, and gradually the sound of gunfire got louder.

When bullets were sprayed into the hall, the DG and other officers took cover behind the podium.

"I hid behind the drapes next to the podium in the Darbar Hall, and watched what was happening," said the witness.

Ten to 15 jawans suddenly entered the hall and started firing indiscriminately. They asked the officers to come out of cover with their hands up.

"As 10 to 15 officers came out of cover following their call, the jawans took them out of the Darbar hall at gunpoint, and soon I heard repeated gunshots outside."

Moments later Sepoy Selim Reza entered the hall with a firearm and a mega phone. He asked the remaining officers to come out of cover. When he threatened to kill them unless they followed his order, the BDR director general, deputy director general and nearly 10 other officers came out of cover.

"As the officers walked down the podium, Selim Reza used abusive language at them, and asked all to 'go one by one'. The officers walked towards the west of the hall in a line," he said.

"The moment the director general stepped out of the hall, the rebels fired shots at the officers indiscriminately."

The witness said he saw sepoy Selim Reza, Atowar, Ibrahim, Obaidul, and Rafiqul of 44 Rifle Battalion, Sepoy Sazzad of 13 Rifle Battalion and Lance Nayek Ekramul of 24 Rifle Battalion spraying the officers with bullets.

At one point, he ran to the boundary wall next to the family quarters near the hall and escaped by jumping over the wall.

However, a defence counsel told the court that the prosecution witness had come up with a false statement against his client.

The lawyer said it was not possible for the witness to see what was happening in front of the four-feet-high podium, as he had admitted during cross-examination that he hid behind it for an hour.

The witness, however, refuted the lawyer's claim.

The court adjourned proceedings till today.

Earlier, defence counsels completed cross-examination of the eighth witness in the case.

BNP asked

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discuss matters related to EVMs or any other election issues.

Earlier, the BNP in a letter requested the election commission to give it an EVM for examination.

But the EC said it could not give the device to a political party.

The commission, however, said the BNP could go to the EC with its technical specialists to do the examination.

The BNP has been opposing the use of EVMs at elections from the beginning. The party maintains that the EVMs are not technically sound and that they might be used to rig polls.

The Election Commission rejects the claim, saying there is no scope for vote rigging with the device.

First witness testifies

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He narrated how Sayedee spearheaded groups of collaborators to loot over 60 houses and shops, and how he ordered the killing of Bisha Bali, a Hindu resident of Umedpur village of Pirojpur.

Sayedee, now 71 years old, stood in the dock at the back of the courtroom during the five-and-a-half-hour proceedings, with an hour's break.

He is the first among the seven accused of war crimes during the Liberation War with 20 specific charges were brought against him on October 3. A total of 68 prosecution witnesses are supposed to give their depositions in the case.

Hawlder, who introduced himself as a businessman, was not allowed to reveal his address for security reasons.

He identified Sayedee and said he knows Sayedee. "During the war, I was serving as a freedom fighter in the Sundarbans freedom fighters' camp. My responsibility was to be a spy and collect confidential information for the freedom fighters," he said.

According to Hawlder, Major Ziauddin Ahmed and AKM Awa of the Sub-Sector 9 assigned him to be a spy.

"Throughout Pirojpur, the collaborators and peace committee members committed rapes, arsons, and murdered many innocent people and members of the Hindu community," he told the court. "They also handed many women over to the Pakistani occupation forces so that they could be raped."

"As a spy, I observed all these criminal activities and delivered the information to the Sundarbans freedom fighters' camp."

"During the war of liberation in 1971, I remained at my home," Hawlder told the court.

He recollected the historic speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on March 7, 1971, and how people from all walks of life prepared for war.

Many went to India for training. Many received guerrilla training inside the country. They collected weapons from their localities and formed resistance against the occupation forces, he said.

"With no solution in sight, the Pakistani forces formed an anti-liberation force, comprised of collaborators, called the Peace Committee with Ghulam Azam, Gulzar AKM Yousuf and Khan Mohammad Afzal of Pirojpur among others," he added.

Members of the peace committee directed Jamaat-e-Islami members in different parts of the country to form local peace committees and kill freedom fighters and Liberation War supporters in their areas.

The Parer Haat peace committee of Pirojpur was formed this way.

Hawlder identified Sayedee, Sekandar Ali Shikder, Danesh Ali Majumder, Mohammad Salehuddin, Mawlana Azhar Ali Talukder, Mohsin, Abdul Karim, Habibur Rahman Munshi, Sobhan Mawlana and Hakim Kari among others as members of the peace committee of Parer Haat.

Most of the members were from local madrasas and anti-liberation organisations, he said.

As Sayedee joined student politics while studying in alim class at Pirojpur's Shashina Madrasa, the madrasa authorities suspended him, he added.

According to Hawlder, Pakistani occupational forces came to Pirojpur in the first week of May, 1971.

"On the morning of May 7, I was outside the house and heard that the occupation forces are coming to Parer Haat. And the Parer Haat peace committee members were waiting at the rickshaw stand to greet them," he said.

"I went to Parer Haat and hid myself near the rickshaw stand. I saw 52 Pakistani army men arrive on 26 rickshaws and members of the peace committee greeted them," he added. Sayedee, fluent in Urdu, spoke to

Captain Ezaz, a captain of the occupation forces.

The collaborators then guided the Pakistani forces inside Parer Haat bazaar.

"They showed Captain Ezaz the shops and homes of Hindus and Awami League activists supporting the Liberation War," said Hawlder, "Captain Ezaz then ordered his forces to raid those [shops and houses]."

After the raid had started, Hawlder saw the situation getting worse and he distanced himself from the spot.

According to Hawlder, he later came to learn that some 30 to 35 shops and homes were looted in the raid.

"The items looted during the raid were distributed under the leadership of Sayedee," he told the court. During the raid, the Pakistani forces found approximately 20kg of gold (22 sher) in an iron safe buried under the shop of Makhan Saha, who was a big businessman in Parer Haat, Hawlder said.

Sayedee personally had led the raid at Makhan Saha's store, located in the northern side of Parer Haat, he claimed.

"After finding so much gold in one room, Captain Ezaz named it Shonar Parer Haat [golden parer haat]," he added.

The looted items were taken to Sayedee's father-in-law's house in the same area. "The collaborators created a fund with the looted goods and the gold, which totalled to around Tk 15 lakh [at that time]," said Hawlder, adding that Sayedee himself traded the looted goods.

"He used the money to make buildings and other assets in Khulna and Dhaka," said Hawlder.

While Sekandar Shikder and Danesh Ali Mollah were the leaders of collaborators, Sayedee, being fluent in Urdu, had managed to build a close tie with Captain Ezaz, he said.

On June 2, Hawlder fled with a group of freedom fighters as he heard that the collaborators were coming to get them.

Later that day, he came to learn that the collaborators led by Danesh, Sekandar, Sayedee, Momin Hawlder, Hakim Kari and Habibur Rahman Munshi had attacked a Hindu-majority area near Umedpur village.

There they looted some 25 houses including those of Chitya Ranjan Talukder, Jahur Talukder, Bisha Bali, Shukur Ali and Anil Mandal.

According to Hawlder, the collaborators also tied ailing Bisha Bali to a coconut tree and beat him up. "Sayedee then ordered the collaborators to shoot Bisha Bali. One collaborator shot him dead."

Recounting the events of the day, Hawlder said after the Pakistan army had sprayed the area with bullets, he along with a group of people hid inside a nearby jungle.

"Some people of the peace committee and the Razakar Bahini went to my home around noon that day. They put pressure on my brother Abdul Mazid and tortured him as he refused to tell them the whereabouts of freedom fighters and the Awami League men," he said.

"They entered the house, looted 10 tolas of gold ornaments, Tk 20,000 from an almirah and looted two tolas of gold from my mother's room, and vandalised furniture costing around Tk 30,000. They damaged our valuables worth around Tk 3 lakh."

"I seek trial of the people who committed crimes against humanity, war crimes, and killed lakhs of people during the Liberation War in 1971," he told the court concluding his around two-hour-long testimony.

Before Hawlder began his deposition, the three judges' panel headed by its Chairman Justice Nizamul Huq, rejected two petitions filed by Sayedee.

One was filed seeking adjournment of the depositions while the other for necessary copies of some documents from the prosecution.

The tribunal ordered the defence to submit a list of their witnesses and documents before it by December 14.

In response to another petition submitted by the defence counsels, the tribunal said the superintendent of police will decide whether they (defence lawyers) would be given police protection when they visit places of offences allegedly committed by Sayedee.

After Hawlder's deposition, Mizanul Islam, a counsel for Sayedee, started cross-examining him yesterday. He asked the witness whether there is any evidence in the court that was seized by the investigators from him.

Hawlder replied in the negative.

The lawyers for Sayedee told the court that they were not prepared to cross examine Hawlder and that they want to start cross-examination of the witness on December 11.

The court then fixed December 11 for Hawlder's cross examination. After Hawlder, second prosecution witness Nabin began his deposition. He is scheduled to resume his testimony today.

Nabin, who was 21 then, said he heard over the radio and television that the International Crimes Tribunal was formed in Bangladesh and that the investigation team of the tribunal would probe the crimes committed during the Liberation War.

"I submitted a compliant to the tribunal chief on July 20 last year seeking justice against the war crimes and this is my statement," he said.

Nabin said the Pakistani occupation forces formed peace committee, Razakar, Al Shams and Al Badr militia forces with the help of some agents and leaders and activists of Jamaat-e-Islami.

PM arrives

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came up with the plan when Hasina met the Indonesian president at Laguna Hotel in Bali, PM's Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad said after the meeting.

Earlier, Hasina reached Indonesia in the afternoon concluding her three-day bilateral visit to Myanmar, to attend the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF) beginning today.

During the meeting, Susilo said the problems of the two countries are identical and those will have to be resolved through enhanced cooperation.

He sought Bangladesh's support to train the UN peacekeepers of his country, reports BSS.

Hasina said no terrorist act took place in Bangladesh in the last three years as the government has successfully tackled terrorism.

She put emphasis on direct air link, enhancing bilateral trade and business and cooperation to achieve food security.

About democracy, the premier said, "Without democracy, development is not possible. We are working for people."

She recalled the Indonesian support when it recognised Bangladesh's independence in 1972, reports UNB.

The president also congratulated Hasina on receiving the South-South Award for her outstanding contributions towards improving the lives of women and children.

The theme of this year's BDF IV is "Enhancing Democratic Participation in a Changing World: Responding to Democratic Voices".

The two-day programme will be held at Bali International Convention Centre in Nusa Dua.

Officials said this year's forum will focus on efforts towards enhanced people participation by way of responding to democratic voices, and relevant issues involved in the process, reports our diplomatic correspondent.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, Ambassador-at-Large M Ziauddin, PM's son Sajib Ahmed Wajed, among others, were present in the meeting.

Hundreds 'occupy' US Congressional offices

AFF, Washington

Hundreds of people from across America demonstrated in Washington yesterday for jobs and stronger social security by converging on the offices of US lawmakers in Congress.

The action, by activists from unions and other organizations, was dubbed Take Back the Capitol and passed off peacefully.

Small groups of protesters, who came from as far away as Florida, Kansas and Wisconsin, entered office buildings around the domed Capitol building, saying they wanted to see their elected representatives.

John Reat, an information technology manager, said he wanted to see Congress "pass the jobs bill, to increase the taxes on the one percent corporations or individuals, no cuts on social security or Medicare. That's what we all are requesting."

However, protesters only got as far as the entrances to the offices and corridors outside.

At the office of Republican Paul Ryan, for example, protesters were informed they should have filled out a request form for a meeting.

Three days of demonstrations were planned in Washington.

"There is an economic crisis in the US; we have 14 million unemployed people, corporations are getting fatter and richer, they are not creating jobs, they are not paying their fair share of taxes," said Renee Asher, a spokeswoman with the SEIU service sector union.

In New York, Occupy Wall Street announced protests against bank foreclosures on indebted homeowners although it was not clear how large the demonstrations would be.

Nasa confirms

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first the US space agency has been able to confirm.

"We have now got good planet confirmation with Kepler-22b," said Bill Borucki, Kepler principal investigator at Nasa Ames Research Centre.

"We are certain that it is in the habitable zone and if it has a surface, it ought to have a nice temperature," he told reporters.

Spinning around its star some 600 light years away, Kepler-22b is 2.4 times the size of the Earth, putting it in class known as "super-Earths," and orbits its Sun-like star every 290 days.

Its near-surface temperature is presumed to be about 72 degrees Fahrenheit (22 Celsius). Scientists do not know, however, whether the planet is rocky, gaseous or liquid.

The latest confirmed exoplanet that could support life brings to three the total number confirmed by global astronomers.

Such planets have the right distance from their star to support water, plus a suitable temperature and atmosphere to support life.

The planet's first "transit," or star crossover, was captured shortly after Nasa launched its Kepler spacecraft in March 2009.

Nasa also announced that Kepler has uncovered 1,094 more potential planets, twice the number it previously had been tracking, according to research being presented at a conference in California this week.

Kepler is Nasa's first mission in search of Earth-like planets orbiting suns similar to ours. It is expected to continue sending information back to Earth until at least November 2012.

In addition to French astronomers' confirmed finding of Gliese 581d in May, Swiss astronomers reported in August that another planet, HD 85512 b, about 36 light years away seemed to be in the habitable zone of its star.

A total of 48 exoplanets and exomo