

New Maldives president vows 'peace and order'

AFP, Male

New Maldives president Mohamed Waheed pledged yesterday to restore "peace and order" as international pressure mounted on him to ease tensions in the island after his predecessor was ousted.

President Mohamed Waheed's office said he assured a visiting European delegation that he would form a "fully inclusive" cabinet, including members of former president's Mohamed Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP).

The EU delegation comprising Colombo-based ambassadors, including French ambassador Christine Robichon, will meet with Maldivian political leaders, including former president Nasheed to assess the political crisis.

Nasheed says he was ousted in a military-backed coup following weeks of opposition protests and has demanded fresh presidential elections. On Sunday, he rejected a US call for compromise and the formation of a unity government.

Waheed has already agreed to a Commonwealth probe into the dramatic fall of Nasheed, the Muslim nation's first democratically elected leader who came to power in 2008.

Quake hits eastern Japan: nuclear plant stable

AFP, Tokyo

A powerful earthquake rocked eastern Japan yesterday, but no tsunami warning was issued and no damage was reported at the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant.

The US Geological Survey said the 6.0 magnitude quake, with an epicentre 10 kilometres (six miles) deep, was centred 166 kilometres east-northeast of Tokyo, where correspondents said buildings swayed.

Japan's meteorological agency also located the quake off the coast of Ibaraki prefecture, south of the stricken plant.

A very small change of tidal level was forecast but was not expected to cause any damage.

Nuclear plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) said the stricken Fukushima Daiichi plant remained stable.

British School

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Smrity College, have qualified for the next phase.

"I have always followed Spelling Bee on television and had wished if I were on this platform. Now finally it's here," said an excited Salman.

He spelt the word "juggernaut" to qualify and now sets his eyes on the final round.

The contest was also held at Heed International School and Cherry Blossom International School on Monday.

Nicky Baul, Shahnoon Kabir and Tanzina Afrin, all class VII students at Heed International School, crossed the first-round hurdle.

Adrito Bari, Istiak Ahmed Fahim and Syeda Marufa Rashid of Cherry Blossom International School also qualified for the second round.

Students from classes VI to X can still avail the opportunity to qualify by playing the online version of Spelling Bee game on www.champs21.com, according to organisers.

The students who could not proceed on to the next round can continue playing the online game and improve their spelling.

Only their best scores will be registered, thus giving everyone an equal opportunity to be a part of the contest.

At least 500 students will be picked from the Dhaka division. So being among the top spellers in the online version is also very important.

SQ Chowdhury

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But Salauddin, who is now behind bars and facing charges of crimes against humanity, appears to be fortunate as his membership in parliament remains valid thanks to a decision of the speaker.

"His [Salauddin's] membership will not be vacated no matter how long he remains absent from the House proceedings. It's my decision," Speaker Abdul Hamid told The Daily Star when his attention was drawn to the matter.

He said Salauddin wants to join the parliament proceedings but is unable due to the prevailing situation. "There is no fault on his part. So, I cannot take steps to declare his seat in parliament vacant for his absence."

Asked whether the House should be informed about the matter, the speaker said he sees no need to do so. "It's my discretion and I alone can allow a member to remain absent from the House proceedings beyond 90 sitting days."

He said the speaker informs the House only in case of vacation of the seat of an MP in parliament for his or her absence.

Speaking anonymously, a constitutional expert however differs with the speaker on the issue. He said the matter should be put before the House for consideration. The Constitution clearly speaks about the "leave of the House" and one may raise question whether the speaker alone can exercise the authority of

the House in this regard.

"It is an extraordinary matter. We did not face such a situation in the past. So the matter should be debated to find a way out," the expert added.

Information available in the Parliament Secretariat shows Salauddin, also a member of BNP national standing committee, last joined the House proceedings on April 4, 2010. Since then he did not attend any sitting of the House.

Law enforcers arrested him in the capital on December 16, 2010 in connection with torching of a car at Moghbazar that left one person dead.

The BNP leader was later shown arrested on charges of crimes against humanity during the country's Liberation War in 1971.

Officials in the Parliament Secretariat say they send an invitation to Salauddin in jail after the president convenes a parliament session. During the session, the secretariat sends necessary papers related to the House business to his residence, they add.

"The BNP MP had on several occasions earlier written to the speaker expressing his desire to attend the House proceedings. The Parliament Secretariat forwarded copies of the letter to the home ministry for taking necessary steps," a senior official told The Daily Star.

The matter still remains unresolved, added the official asking not to be identified.

China ready

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might be prepared to contribute.

China has made clear its growing concerns over the crisis in Europe, repeatedly urging EU leaders to get a grip on the situation, which the foreign ministry said this week had reached a "critical juncture".

European leaders last year approached China, which holds the world's largest foreign exchange reserves, to invest in a bailout fund to rescue debt-stricken states.

EU leaders will discuss in March whether to boost the size of the 500 billion euro European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the permanent rescue fund due to begin operating in July.

Van Rompuy said he welcomed "the readiness of China to cooperate with the European Union in order to ensure the financial stability of the eurozone."

"We have not just navigated a difficult bend, but we have turned a corner," he added.

Leaders of the 17-nation eurozone and eight other EU nations agreed last month to create a new fiscal pact requiring signatories to put balanced budgets into law.

But Moody's this week questioned whether Europe was pulling together adequate resources to deal with the crisis as it chopped the debt ratings of Italy, Spain and Portugal.

The ratings agency also put France, Britain and Austria on warning, saying they were increasingly vulnerable to the eurozone crisis, which has brought Greece to the brink of bankruptcy and triggered violence in a number of cities.

Wen's comments came after the International Monetary Fund warned last week that an escalation of the EU debt crisis could slash China's economic growth in half this year.

Meanwhile, China and the EU stressed in the joint communiqué that the two sides should work towards resolving the MES issue "in a swift and comprehensive way."

Beijing has long demanded that the European Union accord China full market economy status, a technical designation that would remove certain restrictions to Chinese exports and investments in Europe.

EU leaders say the Asian giant has not yet met the necessary conditions, pointing out that most of China's largest companies are state-owned and their leaders appointed by the government.

Wen pledged that China would improve its laws and regulations in relation to foreign investment, enhance protection of intellectual property and improve its investment environment.

"China will continue to fully meet its World Trade Organization commitments," he said. "It will continue to expand market access."

The two sides also discussed the crisis in Syria, after China and Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning the regime's bloody crackdown on protests, drawing international ire.

"China will absolutely not protect any party, including the government in Syria," Wen told reporters, as the international community warned of a humanitarian disaster in Syria.

Since the crackdown was launched less than a year ago, more than 6,000 people have been killed, monitors say.

The United States has called the rare double veto "travesty", while one Syrian opposition group said it had handed President Bashar al-Assad's regime a "licence to kill".

Barroso and Van Rompuy will also hold talks with China's President Hu Jintao on Wednesday as part of the summit, which was originally due to take place in October, but had to be postponed due to the debt crisis.

No KL venture

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Bangladesh Secretariat office adding, "That means there will be more delay. This is not acceptable to us."

"Our relationship with the World Bank will be there. But whether they want the Padma Bridge or not, we have to get their clarification," he added.

On the deal with Malaysia, he said, "It's quite a different kind of a deal. It's a public private partnership [PPP] deal. We have some work to do. If we decide on going with the PPP model, we will have to withdraw or cancel our agreements with the World Bank, ADB and the Japanese donors. Before doing so, we want to have dialogues with them and get their feedback."

He said PPP is an expensive alternative. "We will try to find out more donors," he added.

"We don't want further delay. We want to begin construction in the next [dry] season," he said.

The Padma Bridge construction was originally supposed to begin in last October.

Following some hectic visits to Dhaka by a special envoy of the Malaysian prime minister in January, Bangladesh Communications Minister Obaidul Quader told the media that the government will sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Malaysia for the Padma Bridge project.

Similar announcement

was also made by the Malaysian authorities, according to media reports.

But the Malaysian proposal drew several criticisms. WB-led international donors are offering loans at an interest rate much lower than 1 percent, but Malaysia will charge interest at a commercial rate which could exceed 10 percent.

Malaysia itself will not pump in the fund, rather it will raise the fund from United Arab Emirates.

And a host of other technical issues make the Malaysian proposal look like a financial mess where the government will have to impose huge toll on bridge users to pay back the loan.

Several officials of the Bridge Division of communications ministry dismissed signing of an MoU with Malaysia on February 21.

"There is already an agreement with multilateral donors. How can we go for signing for the same with another donor? This is against the norm," said an official adding, "This will hurt our relationship with the donors."

"If we must sign an MoU with Malaysia, we have to resolve more than one such issues first," said another official.

An Economic Relations Division high official was critical about the financial terms and conditions of Malaysia, saying, "If we go for this, we might have to charge a motorbike rider 5,000 taka

for using the bridge just to pay our donors. This is not possible. We hope the decision makers understand this problem."

On the other hand, a WB official told The Daily Star, "The government sought three months time, but we gave six months extension because we believe the problem can be resolved by then."

WB suspended the financing alleging undue business intervention by Sahco, a company owned by former communications minister Syed Abul Hossain's family. The allegation is that Sahco sought commission from project bidders to ensure that one of them would get the contract. WB also alleged that Canadian company SNC Lavalin was prequalified for the job of project supervision through such an arrangement.

WB Country Representative in Bangladesh Ellen Goldstein in January said the Canadian police authorities are investigating Lavalin's possible foul play in the project. Once this investigation is done, WB will decide on the financing.

Yesterday an official of WB, on condition of anonymity, drawing attention to the Malaysian proposal, said if the government signs an MoU with Malaysia for the same project, it will send a wrong message to the donors. It will negatively affect Bangladesh's good relationship with them, the official added.

Border killings irk PM

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of State Robert O Blake, who asked Hasina whether the recent killings by BSF deteriorated Bangladesh-India relations.

The US envoy was talking to the premier at her Sangsad Bhaban office in the capital yesterday evening.

"We are trying to stop such incidents, we are repeatedly requesting them to keep their words that were given by their highest level at different times," Hasina told Blake.

About the issue of terrorism and counter-terrorism, the premier informed the US envoy that Bangladesh soil will not be allowed to be used for any terrorist and extremist activities.

She mentioned various laws adopted by parliament to combat terrorism. "We are showing zero tolerance to terrorism and extremism."

Hasina also mentioned that in the last three years no bombing incident had occurred in the country, which was normal during the BNP-Jamaat regime.

She said there is no boundary for terrorists. "If it is nurtured in one corner of the world, this will be a big problem for the rest of the world."

As Blake requested Hasina to send a letter to the

US government to deploy US Peace Core in Bangladesh, the premier declined.

She said the US Peace Core came to Bangladesh during the previous tenure of Awami League government in 1998. But, the US government withdrew them during the BNP-Jamaat regime on security reason.

Regarding regional connectivity, Hasina said Bangladesh already had taken steps to establish a regional connectivity with India, Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal.

"India gave green signal to set up communication link among Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan over India," she said.

The premier requested Blake to extend his cooperation to allow duty free and quota free access of Bangladeshi apparels to the US market.

She mentioned that there are four million people employed in the RMG sector, and more than 50 percent of them are women.

Hasina said the duty free and quota free access of Bangladeshi apparels to the US market will help the RMG sector a lot. Moreover, the women workers will be directly benefited by this.

When Blake asked the premier about Bangladesh's

plan to set up an embassy in Afghanistan, she said that in principle Bangladesh has agreed to set up an embassy there.

M Nazrul Islam, deputy press secretary to the premier, briefed reporters after the meeting.

Ambassador-at-Large M Ziauddin and US Ambassador in Dhaka Dan Mozena were present.

Rid Pharma

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standards, Shafiqul Islam, an official of the Drug Administration, stated in the case.

Following the test, the government seized all the syrups from the market and shut the company's factory in Brahmanbaria.

Charges against the five were framed in March last year. But the trial could not open as Shafiqul, the complainant of the case, did not appear before the court on any of the seven dates fixed by it earlier, court sources said.

Shafiqul, who was involved in the test of those syrups, is the first prosecution witness in the case.

During his deposition at the court of Judge Md Abdul Majid, Shafiqul yesterday described how he and some of his colleagues probed the deaths of the children.

Prime accused Mizanur Rahman, managing director of Rid Pharma, and his wife Sheuly Rahman, a director of the company, were present in court. They are now out on bail.

The three other accused - Abdul Gani, another director of the company, and two of its pharmacists, Mahbulul Islam and Enamul Haque -- are absconding.

DEPOSITION
In his deposition, Shafiqul said he came to know from news reports on July 21, 2009, that a number of children had died of renal failure at Shishu Hospital in the capital allegedly after taking the Rid Pharma syrups.

On the same day, the then director of the Drug Administration asked him and one of his colleagues, Mohammad Altaf Hossain, to probe the matter.

As directed, they met the then director Prof AR Khan of Shishu Hospital and requested him to supply samples of the syrups.

The hospital authorities supplied them with a sample each of Ridaplex Syrup and Temset Suspension, he told the court.

He will continue his deposition on March 21.

Strong 6.5 earthquake hits Solomon Islands

AFP, Sydney

A strong 6.5-magnitude earthquake shook the Solomon Islands yesterday but there was no threat of a widespread destructive tsunami and no reports of damage, US seismologists said.

The quake hit at 7:19 pm local time (0819 GMT), 176 kilometres (110 miles) southeast of the capital Honiara at a depth of 54 kilometres, the US Geological Survey said.

The Hawaii-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Center said there was "no destructive widespread tsunami threat" based on historical data.

"However, earthquakes of this size sometimes generate local tsunamis that can be destructive along coasts located within a hundred kilometres of the earthquake epicentre," it added.

The Solomon Islands is on a tectonic plate margin in the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire and is frequently hit by quakes. A strong 6.6-magnitude quake hit the island group in January but there were no reports of damage or injuries.

In 2007 a tsunami following an 8.1-magnitude earthquake killed at least 52 people in the Solomon Islands and left thousands homeless.

Tibetan monk sets himself on fire in China

AFP, Beijing

A teenage monk set himself on fire to protest China's rule in the nation's south-west, exile groups said yesterday, as police in Washington arrested Tibet activists during a visit by China's vice president.

The 19-year-old Tibetan Buddhist monk, identified as Lobsang Gyatso, set himself ablaze on Monday in Sichuan province's restive Aba county, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) and Free Tibet said.

The Washington-based ICT said police violently beat the monk as they extinguished the flames, before taking him into custody. It was not immediately clear whether he survived.

He was a monk at Aba's Kirti monastery, a leading Tibetan Buddhist institution that has been the scene of repeated protests by Tibetans against what they say is religious and cultural repression by Beijing.

At least 20 Tibetans have set fire to themselves in the past year to protest what they see as a lack of rights under Chinese rule, leading Beijing to impose virtual martial law, according to residents and exiled groups.

In death

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telephone tower, tied their hands with a scarf and jumped to their deaths. And to die for love they chose none other than Valentine's Day.

The incident happened at Kathi Bazar of sadar upazila in Gopalganj yesterday.

The dead are Mitu, 16, and Saud Sheikh, 17.

Mitu was the daughter of Zahid Molla of Khelna village while Saud was the son of Angel Sheikh of Kathi village -- both under sadar upazila.

Comments were not immediately available from either of the families.

Police said they recovered the bodies with their hands tied together with a scarf.

When the relationship between the two came to light two years ago, Saud's family admitted him to a school in Dhaka, said Dilip Kumar Pal, headmaster of KKTMC High School, where they both had studied.

Around two weeks back, Mitu's family married her off to a man in Mymensingh, he added.

On Monday, Saud returned to the village and met Mitu. It was probably in the night that they had decided to commit suicide, said Dilip.