

14-party rally

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rally, the first of its kind since the 14-party alliance assumed office on January 6, 2009, said AL acting General Secretary Mahbul Alam Hanif after the meeting.

He said the intention of the grand rally is to mobilise people in favour of the war crimes trial against the backdrop of "BNP-Jamaat conspiracy to foil it". AL would not obstruct BNP's rally in the capital on March 12 as the party believes in democratic process, he added.

Insiders of the 14-party alliance said the government has information that BNP might go for an indefinite sit-in from March 12 in the name of the grand rally. On February 9, BNP Chairperson and Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia announced the March 12 grand rally in Dhaka to mount pressure on the government for restoring caretaker government system.

Leaders of the AL-led alliance told The Daily Star that their grand rally would be to pre-empt that any indefinite sit-in by the BNP-

Jamaat men.

The 14-party alliance will also form human chains on March 9 and 11 in all district headquarters and the capital and hold another rally in Khulna headquarters on March 23 on the same issue as announced on February 20.

Meanwhile, the prime minister is expected to hold a meeting today at 7:00pm in Gono Bhaban with the leaders of her party central committee, its associate bodies, and its Dhaka, Narayanganj, Narsingdi, Manikganj and Munshiganj district units, and the district council administrators, ministers and lawmakers of greater Dhaka.

Awami League has also a plan to hold the biggest-ever rally in the capital on the historic March 7. According to party insiders, Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate the rally at 3:00pm in the capital's Suhrawardy Udyan. A procession will be brought out from there to Bangabandhu Memorial Museum in Dhanmondi.

River-linking

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is a priority for us. When it comes to the feasibility reports, these were prepared because the government is eager to do it," said Pawan Kumar Bansal, the minister.

But he stressed that water being a state matter, the central government cannot move further without taking the states on board.

His remarks came close on the heels of the Indian Supreme Court asking the government to constitute a committee for implementing the interlinking of rivers.

"It is a very, very difficult project. It is a difficult task to arrive at a consensus among states. They [states] are reluctant to get into an immediate agreement on sharing of water. Also, water is a state subject and we cannot impose anything on anyone."

"But we try to take the concerned states on board. Wherever there is a possibility on those linkages, we try to take them on board," he told reporters.

He said that out of 30 possible links identified, five projects were flagged as priority projects.

"Out of those five projects, the detailed project report [DPR] of Ken-Betwa has been prepared. On others, there are talks between states. In one case, the chief ministers of

Maharashtra and Gujarat states signed the MoU for preparing the DPR in the presence of the prime minister recently.... The government considers this to be an important thing," Bansal added.

Of the 30 possible links that were identified, 16 are in the Himalayan component and 14 are in the peninsular component.

Explaining the benefits of interlinking which Bansal prefers to term transfer of water from surplus basins to deficit basins, the minister said the ultimate irrigation potential which can be created in the country is 140 million hectares, of which 110 million hectares have been created.

"If we are able to transfer water from surplus basins to deficit basins, then another 25 million hectares can be directly created in addition to 140 million hectares," he said, adding another 10 million hectares will be the result of improvement in groundwater level.

Water 'nearly dries up in Arunachal'

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Brahmaputra, locally known as Siang, rose suddenly by 30 metres and inundated almost the entire township.

The sudden flood destroyed properties and claimed seven lives following the collapse of a hydropower dam in Tibet, said Tako Dabi, also the political adviser to Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Nabam Tuki.

He claimed to have inspected the dried bed of the river.

The Indian government and its agencies like the Central Water Commission should immediately conduct a study in collaboration with the state government to find the crux of the problem, he added.

Yarlung Tsangpo, the highest river in the world, is a watercourse that originates at Tamlung Tso Lake

in western Tibet, southeast of Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar.

It later forms the South Tibet Valley and Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon, before entering India at Tuting in Arunachal, takes the name of Brahmaputra in Assam and enters Bangladesh, writes our New Delhi correspondent.

The 2,900-kilometre river joins the Meghna before emptying into the Bay of Bengal, along the way supplying water to hundreds of millions of farmers and residents.

"It was shocking to find the Siang river drying up and patches of sand visible on its bed in a very large stretch close to Pasighat town," local state lawmaker Tako Dabi told AFP by telephone from the scene.

"We suspect the sudden

drying up of the Siang could be a result of China either diverting the river water on their side or due to some artificial blockades somewhere in the upper reaches," added Dabi, also a former home minister.

He estimated the flow was about 40 percent of its normal strength. "The water level has reduced by roughly three metres in the past few days and we really don't know the reason," K Apung, an engineer at the State Water Resources Department in Pasighat, explained to AFP.

Video footage from the scene showed the Siang -- normally a gushing torrent several kilometres wide at Pasighat, according to Dabi -- reduced to flowing in narrow channels in a large sandy riverbed.

The problem was highlighted on the day the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi held talks in New Delhi with his Indian counterpart SM Krishna.

India is extremely nervous about the danger of its giant northern neighbour diverting rivers that originate in Tibet and flow into India, or disrupting their flow with hydroelectric plants.

The two countries have held frequent talks about the issue at the highest level.

"We have been assured that nothing will be done which affects India's interests adversely," Indian PM Manmohan Singh told the upper house of parliament last August.

Energy-hungry and water-deficient China is building hydroelectric facilities on the Yarlung Tsangpo. India says it has received assurances they are "run-of-the-river" projects rather than dams which would disrupt the flow.

"Our satellite pictures

convey that no such activity of any storage facility is being worked out by the Chinese authorities," Krishna told reporters yesterday after his talks with his Chinese counterpart.

He said that in light of the media reports about the river's flow, "we will get our ambassador (in Beijing) to check it."

A senior official at the water resources ministry in New Delhi, who asked not to be named, denied that there was any problem.

"The river drying up is a figment of their imagination," he told AFP.

Brahma Chellaney, an expert in New Delhi who has written extensively on water issues in Asia, said the alarm in Arunachal warranted further investigation.

He said China had not signed any water-sharing agreements in accordance with international norms with its many downstream neighbours who are dependent on the vast fresh water flows from the Tibetan plateau.

"If you look at the pattern, they (China) build dams and initiate them very quietly," Chellaney told AFP, citing the experience of countries downstream on the Mekong river.

India and China have decided that 2012 will be the "India-China year of Friendship and Cooperation" in a bid to overcome mutual mistrust and suspicion that continues to bedevil their relations.

The two Asian giants have an unresolved border dispute that was the cause of a brief but bloody war in 1962.

China claims almost all of Arunachal Pradesh as its own territory.

Misdeed after midnight

FROM PAGE 1

are there to oversee everything but they do not have anyone on duty at night.

The reason for all this is rather simple. A huge amount of money is involved.

The Daily Star correspondent observed and investigated things going on at the bridge for two nights. The Daily Star learnt that the employees of a joint venture assigned to maintain the bridge and operate the weighing scales have established an elaborate nexus to make money out of truckers carrying too much on their vehicles.

They appointed agents at Eloga Bazar on the east and Kodda, Nalka and Sirajganj intersections on the west of the bridge. The agents collect money from the truckers. The overloaded trucks do not cross the bridge during the day. They wait nearby like in Eloga, Kodda, Nalka and even in Bogra and Sirajganj. They only cross the bridge at night and after getting the go-ahead from the weighing machine operators.

In the guise of a helper of a truck driver, The Daily Star correspondent talked to some truckers at Nalka bazaar, a few kilometres west of Bangabandhu Bridge, in the evening of February 20.

One of the truckers was Rahim from Bogra.

"I paid Tk 1,200 to an agent as I am carrying an extra seven tonnes," he said.

Asked whether it will be wise to cross the bridge in the evening, he said, "You may face difficulty now. But you can cross easily after midnight by paying money to the operators or their agents."

Truck driver Palash said, "We pay from Tk 500 to Tk 2,000 for an overloaded truck." He was carrying 23 tonnes of maize from Chapainawabganj. He was a regular bridge crosser.

"I paid Tk 1,000 to an agent of those who are operating the scales," he told the correspondent in disguise.

Driver Khokon who was carrying rice from Dinajpur, said, "We waited for the signal of the agents, who contact the operators over the telephone."

He said trucks are always overloaded since it is profitable. He said it will always be more profitable to overload a truck rather than using two trucks or three. "We are also ready to pay bribes to pass with overloaded trucks as it reduces carrying cost."

The picture was rosy. Everyone was happy, the truckers, the machine operators, and their agents.

But it is costing the nation dearly. It is not just revenue loss due to fewer vehicles crossing the bridge; it is damaging the vital Bangabandhu Bridge.

Numerous cracks have already developed on the bridge.

"The expansion joints of the bridge are being damaged due to plying of overloaded vehicles," said Khan Mahmud Amanat, a professor of civil engineering department at Bangladesh

University of Engineering and Technology.

Many alleged that officials of Bangladesh Bridge Authority remain silent about the illegal "passage fee" since they have a stake in this.

Bangladesh Bridge Authority Assistant Engineer Wahiduzzaman, who has been posted at the bridge since 2001, said irregularities happen at night when the scales operators and the police are on duty.

"It is the operating company's job to prevent anomalies but some people blame us without proof," he told The Daily Star.

Sources in the Bangladesh Bridge Authority said 4,000 to 4,500 trucks use the country's largest bridge every day and half of them are overloaded. The nexus makes between Tk 4 lakh and Tk 5 lakh each night, they claimed.

However, the government, the operators and the police are least bothered about this.

The government in November 2010 appointed the joint venture company, of Chinese Meteorological Construction Company and local Shamim Enterprise Ltd (Sel) and United Development Corporation (Udc), with Tk 54 crore for five years for maintenance and operation of the 4.8km bridge, its approach roads and for operating the two weighbridges on each side of the bridge. The company has been accused of misappropriating tolls of the bridge.

The Daily Star over the last week made several attempts to contact officials of the company for their comments on the illegal "passage fee" but failed. The officials were not picking up their phones.

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Application Deadline: 12 March 2012