

Hillary in India to breathe life into ties

AFP, Kolkata

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton landed in India yesterday with hopes of reinvigorating a relationship seen as losing steam despite efforts to bring the world's two largest democracies closer.

She was greeted by streets lined with waving well-wishers as she started her visit in Kolkata, where she will tour monuments and meet ordinary citizens in her latest bid to use her star appeal as a diplomatic tool.

She heads on to New Delhi today for talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with whom she is expected to raise US calls for India to stop buying oil from Iran, one of the most open disagreements in years between the countries.

She said she saw ample progress in relations with India, pointing to rising trade and cooperation in areas from education to clean energy.

"I think it's like any relationship -- there is progress in some areas that we are very heartened by, and there is more work to be done," Hillary told reporters before her arrival.

"But that's the commitment that we make when we say to another country, we want to be your partner," she said.

After more than a decade of warming rela-



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton waves after arriving in Kolkata yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

tions, India has bristled at a US law that would impose sanctions on banks from countries that buy oil from Iran due to concerns over Tehran's contested nuclear programme.

A senior US official travelling with Hillary acknowledged that India had quietly been cutting back on Iranian oil and that New Delhi - fiercely protective of its sovereignty -- could not be seen as buckling under US pressure.

The official said that Carlos Pascual, the US pointman on the issue, would visit New Delhi later this month to determine the next step. Only EU nations and Japan have so far been given exemptions to the sanctions which go into effect on June 28.

India is highly dependent on foreign energy and has historically enjoyed friendly relations with Tehran.

But the US official said that Indian businesses had made "a major strategic bet" on continuing good relations with the United States and did not want to jeopardise them over Iran.

Hillary will meet today in Kolkata with West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who took power last year by sweeping out nearly 35 years of communist rule in the eastern state.

Hillary will seek to show solidarity with a fellow female leader but also press Banerjee to back the opening up of India's fast-growing retail sector to major foreign companies such as Walmart, the US official said.

Banerjee, a fractious ally of Singh's government, was instrumental in scuttling planned retail reforms. Critics charge that liberalising the sector would devastate India's ubiquitous small stores, but foreign retailers contend that they can improve efficiency and consumer choice.

President Barack Obama has backed another of India's longtime ambitions by supporting its bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. But few expect UN reform anytime soon and some Indians have accused the Obama administration of a lack of attention.

NEPAL FLOOD Hope fades for victims

Toll feared to hit 60, 8 rescued

AFP, Kathmandu

Rescuers scouring Nepal's central Annapurna region after severe flash flooding said yesterday that there was almost no hope of finding survivors and that the final toll could be as high as 60 dead.

The bodies of 15 people have been recovered but district police superintendent Sailesh Thapa told AFP that 43 missing people, including three Ukrainian tourists, were feared dead.

"So far, 12 of the 15 bodies have been identified. An excavator has reached the worst affected areas and is clearing the mud," he said.

"We have a list of another 43 people who have gone missing. Their chances of survival are almost zero. The three Ukrainians are still missing."

Just eight people have been rescued since the Seti burst its banks near the city of Pokhara, a popular tourist hub, on Saturday, sweeping away an entire village, and swamping families enjoying picnics on the river banks.

Sniffer dogs have been sent 200 kilometres from the capital Kathmandu to search for bodies along the banks of the river, which has now subsided, while police and army personnel hunted for survivors.

Good ties with all parties

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Chowdhury, who was present in the meeting, told reporters that Tipaimukh dam, Teesta water share, border killing and next parliamentary polls dominated the 40-minute discussion.

As the BNP chief inquired about the development in Teesta river deal, Pranab said they are working to build up a national consensus within India keeping West Bengal state government involved in the process.

Stressing resolving prob-

lems through discussion, Khaleda said experts of both countries should conduct a technical survey before signing of the Teesta agreement.

The former premier said killings at border should be fully stopped when the Indian minister said they had asked authorities concerned to bring down the number of such incidents, Shamsar said at the briefing.

Khaleda appreciated Indian Election Commission and polls process but said it will take time

for Bangladesh to reach that stage as democracy started its journey here only a few years back.

The people of Bangladesh want free and fair elections and this is why the opposition is demanding a non-party caretaker government system to oversee the next national polls, she said.

In reply, Pranab said it is an internal affair of Bangladesh. "But we believe what the people want has to be implemented."

On Tipaimukh dam issue, the Indian minister said he

had proposed to form a sub-group under the Joint Rivers Commission to review the entire matter and to hold discussion between two countries before the project implementation.

Khaleda said government and non-government experts from India and Bangladesh have to be included in the sub-group so that it earns the trust of the peoples of both countries.

"We need details of the project and we must be ensured that it will not be harmful to Bangladesh. If

experts from both countries approve the project, Bangladesh can take part in it," Shamsar quoted Khaleda as saying in the meeting.

Pranab said they have no objection to the inclusion of

experts in the JRC sub-group.

In the meeting, which started at 4:35pm, the BNP chairperson's advisers Reaz Rahman and Sabihuddin Ahmed were also present.

50 Indian double-decker

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first tried to inaugurate the new bus operation by Indian Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, but the plan had to be scrapped after failing to get a spot in his schedule. Later, the ministry sought Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's presence and finally received her nod for Tuesday morning.

For the inaugural ceremony, two buses will be taken to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). After that, all the 50 buses would be engaged in different routes in Dhaka and Chittagong.

The buses procured from Ashok Leyland of India have been kept at the Gazipur depot of Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC), a state-run body and operator of the buses.

These double-deckers were purchased under a \$24 million project of collecting a total of 290 buses in a bid to ease transport crisis in the capital and other parts of the country.

However, urban and transport experts say bringing in new buses would not be fruitful unless the roads are made favourable for those to ply on.

"Dozens of double-decker buses are now on way to Dhaka," said Iftekhar Ahmed Tipu, chairman of Ifad Group, which got the import contract.

He hoped that all the buses would arrive by September.

The 82-seated buses have 50 standing capacity. Manufactured in Mumbai, these were sent to Bangladesh by road. Ifad Group is the sole agent of Ashok Leyland in Bangladesh.

BRTC has 973 buses, including 109 double-deckers, across the country. Of those, 352 including 105 double-deckers are running in the capital.

The number of buses and minibuses operating in the capital was reduced to 3,000

from about 7,000 two years ago, sources in different transport associations said. This has crippled the transport crisis of the city.

TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT SYSTEM A BAR
Meanwhile, experts say the idea of importing more buses will not help improve the perennial traffic congestion unless there is a proper traffic management and flawless signalling system and the roads are kept free from illegal parking and other occupants.

They said a total of 530 buses were imported from China and South Korea in the last two years. But the effort failed to yield positive result because of the regular traffic jam on the city's limited and mostly narrow roads.

"The existing buses can't make their optimum trips and ferry enough passengers. Adding more buses will never be sustainable and it will rather worsen the situation," said Prof Shamsul Hoque of civil engineering department at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet).

He said a bus could make four or five trips a day instead of its usual eight trips only for being stuck on the roads for hours.

The situation, according to him, could be improved by increasing capacity of the existing limited road networks and ensuring free run of the buses.

Prof Hoque also reminded the disappointing fate of the buses operated by the BRTC. The expensive Volvo buses became unusable in only seven years whereas those had a lifetime of 20 years, he added.

The communications ministry has plans to import from India 100 single-deckers air-conditioned buses with \$6.65 million under the Indian credit, and 50 more articulated or bendy buses, with \$5.2 million.

I am in the dark

Pranab Mukherjee on presidential nomination

PTI, Dhaka



Pranab Mukherjee

With Congress playing its cards close to its chest, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, widely regarded as a front-runner for the Presidential candidate, yesterday said he was "in the dark" over the issue while the Left parties said they would back a candidate with "wider acceptance."

"We are delighted that your name was proposed for Indian Presidency? What's your comment?" asked a scribe during an interaction with senior editors here.

Mukherjee laughed at the suggestion, before saying that he himself was "in the dark" on the question.

"I am afraid I do not know. In our system of decision-making, unless a decision is taken nobody discloses it officially. So, I am in the dark as you are," replied Mukherjee, who is often called the UPA government's "trouble shooter".

Mukherjee, 76, who is on a twoday tour of Bangladesh to join the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of Rabindranath Tagore, gave no indication on what is going on in the back channel deliberations in the Congress and the UPA.

His comments came days after he called the stories around his candidature "speculative" while Congress President Sonia Gandhi had asked the media to be patient as there was still time for the presidential polls in July.

The past week has witnessed intense speculation in India over who would occupy the Rashtrapati Bhawan next, with Mukherjee and the current Vice President Hamid Ansari being touted as the main contenders.

BNP to stage demo

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Ahmed made the announcement at a press conference at the party's central office at Nayapaltan in the capital.

"We hope that the government would meet our demands within this time [May 9]. Otherwise, we will announce tougher programmes that day," he said.

As per the announcement, BNP and its allies will stage demonstrations in every divisional and district headquarters on Wednesday.

Earlier on May 2, Moudud, also the former law minister, threatened to announce yesterday programmes harsher than hartal if their demands were not met within the four days in between.

The other demands include withdrawal of the "false cases" filed against top leaders of the alliance, including BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, unconditional release of the arrested

leaders and public security through an end to "abduction, killing and torture."

Moudud alleged that panic gripped people due to an increasing number of abductions and killings. "The ongoing agitation will turn into an out-governed movement if it fails to give back Ilias Ali," he said while addressing a rally at Nayapaltan on May 2.

Former lawmaker and BNP Organising Secretary M Ilias Ali went missing around midnight of April 17.

The main opposition claims that the law enforcement agencies had picked him up. The government, however, refutes the allegation, claiming that it is a drama staged by the BNP.

Protesting Ilias' disappearance, the BNP enforced three consecutive 12-hour shutdowns from April 22 to 24 across the country and the BNP-led 18-party alliance did two dawn to dusk hartals on April 29 and 30.

Rejoinder

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prohibited Nusrat, not him, from taking the child abroad.

He said it was Nusrat who proposed a solenama agreement about Anan's custodianship. "Subsequently, the court on March 14, 2011 appointed me the legal custodian with the provision that our son will stay with his mother from Friday after Juma till Saturday early morning," said Bakul, adding that Nusrat violated the solenama by keeping the kid in her parents' house for three months after she remarried.

He said in September 2011, the court ordered Nusrat to return Anan to Bakul's custody immediately or face a contempt of court charge. As she did not comply, Bakul filed a petition following which the court on December 4 the same year ordered the mother to handover the child to the father. This time,

the court did not mention anything about the weekly provision of Anan staying with his mother, the rejoinder said.

It said Nusrat on February 3 this year filed a case against Bakul alleging that he kidnapped and smuggled Anan to India with an intention of selling the boy -- following which the court issued an arrest warrant for Bakul and awarded the custody of the child to Nusrat. "The fact is in January 2012, I took the decision of getting him admitted to a boarding school in India considering his future and welfare," Bakul said.

He said Nusrat's claim that Bakul was barred by the court from taking Anan abroad was false. Bakul said he was neither informed nor was given any notice by the court or her lawyer about the restriction.

Nusrat's allegation that Bakul forged a passport is

also false, he said adding, "She had obtained a passport for our son without my knowledge."

About his arrest, he said while returning to Bangladesh on February 3 this year he came to learn from the immigration department about a case Nusrat filed with Sutrapur police station against him, and he was taken into police custody. He said he was released on bail on February 12.

He said Nusrat got custody of the child by giving false information to the court that he was in jail on February 20, and therefore their son was without a guardian. "Nusrat used the verdict of February 20 to obtain letters and orders from the Deputy High Commission of Bangladesh in Kolkata and the Supreme Court to convince the school authorities to handover Anan to her," Bakul said.

Bakul regretted having

to make public a private legal battle concerning the child's custody between its parents after their divorce.

He said the published report deliberately ignored the trauma of the father. He said he played the role of both mother and father for Anan when Nusrat went abroad for higher education, leaving the child of five behind.

Bakul said he sacrificed his personal and professional interests, skipped social obligations, and even changed his lifestyle giving priority to his son's interest.

"I have reasons to firmly believe that our son will have a better upbringing if he is in my legal custody and that is the sole reason why I have been going through the strenuous legal processes over the past few years," he said.

The Daily Star regrets publishing the photo of the child.

Businesses to seek views of others

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15, said FBCCI president AK Azad adding that this time they would not only seek opinions from businessmen but also ask other professionals about their view about hartal.

The meeting with teachers, workers, members from the civil society, other chambers and trade bodies was scheduled to be held much earlier but was then postponed as former FBCCI presidents are now staying abroad.

The demand for banning hartal came after the main

opposition enforced five dawn-to-dusk general strikes in the last nine days of April, which caused significant disruption to the economy. BNP had called hartals in protest at its organising secretary and former lawmaker M Ilias Ali going missing around midnight of April 17.

"We will meet the government and the opposition party. We want an effective dialogue with the political leaders and this is why we want opinions from a cross section of people," the FBCCI chairman said.

Former FBCCI bosses demanded that the political leaders avoid hartal for greater interest of the economy. The group held the previous meeting at Westin Hotel in Dhaka on May 2.

Mahbubur Rahman, Salman F Rahman, Abul Kashem, Akram Hossain, Annisul Huq and Mir Nasir Hossain, among other former presidents of FBCCI, were present at the meeting. Former FBCCI administrator Syed Manzur Elahi was also present there.

On the following day, the

FBCCI in its general council meeting demanded that a law be enacted to ban hartal as it negatively impacts on the economy.

Annisul Huq, another former FBCCI president and one of the initiators of the dialogue, said two or three former top leaders of the chamber would be staying abroad in the next few days.

"So, we cannot arrange for a meeting before May 12," he said. "We will meet political leaders, but before that we will prepare a strategic plan for the dialogue," he added.

Experts stay concerned

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"If they say they are not doing anything that harms us, it is not true. We have already been affected for diversion of Teesta water," said Inamul, a leading hydrologist in the country.

India has recently completed a survey on linking the Ganges River with the Sundarbans and is conducting another survey on the Manas-Sankosh-Teesta-Ganges project.

It also initiated another survey on the Brahmaputra after the Indian Supreme Court had asked the Indian government to go ahead with the river-linking project.

While India keeps

Bangladesh in the dark about its projects on trans-boundary rivers, different websites, independent studies and international reports give a gloomy picture, just the opposite of what the Indian high-ups are saying.

A report titled "Mountains of Concrete" published by non-governmental organisation International Rivers in 2008 says, "As many dams are built in the Himalayas, on every tributary and every river, the downstream impacts will extend from the mountains to the plains and all the way to the estuaries."

"A large number of dams

in the basins would cause dramatic transformations in the patterns, quantity and quality of flows," it says.

A group of Bangladeshi experts conducted a study five years ago to ascertain the impact of the Indian project that involves linking 30 major rivers and diverting the water of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra.

About 30,000 square kilometres of Khulna and Barisal divisions, and parts of Rajshahi and Dhaka divisions will be severely affected, says the study. The capital also falls in the danger zone.

"We basically conducted a qualitative study based on information from several

sources. The effects could be even worse," said a senior analyst, who was involved with the study.

Biodiversity, agriculture and industry in the Ganges Dependant Area (GDA) -- both sides of the Padma River -- and parts of the Meghna River bank will be badly hit if India implements the river-linking project.

The GDA alone covers 20 percent of the country and is home to around 30 million people.

The river-linking project aims to divert river water from India's north-eastern region that witnesses an annual rainfall of 3,500mm to its west, a region with

annual rainfall as low as 700mm.

"If we want to ascertain the impacts of the river-linking project, we need details. But we do not know what they are doing," Dr Ainun Nishat told The Daily Star earlier.

During Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's India visit in January 2010, Bangladesh and India signed a treaty on bilateral cooperation that includes sharing of river waters.

Bangladesh allowed India to use water of the Feni River for its plant in Tripura after the two countries resumed talks for sharing the water of Teesta and Feni rivers last year. But India has still kept

Bangladesh waiting on signing the Teesta water-sharing deal.

In the meantime, India went ahead with its river-linking and Tipaimukh hydroelectric projects. It did not even inform Bangladesh about the formation of a company to implement the Tipaimukh project.

Pranab yesterday told the Bangladesh prime minister that a subcommittee under the Joint Rivers Commission will be formed to conduct a study on the proposed Tipaimukh dam. Bangladesh will be informed about the findings to clear confusion from people's minds about the project.

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