

PM pledges rehabilitation

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After the cabinet meeting yesterday, a few ministers told The Daily Star that the Bangladesh Army would carry out the rehabilitation programme of the affected Buddhists so that it was completed quickly.

They said every Buddhist family who had been badly affected during the attack would be given Tk 2-3 lakh. The government would also help restore all temples as they were before.

However, a few ministers expressed concern that two-century-old wood which was used in the pagodas could be hard to find for the rebuild.

The prime minister, referring to a letter of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, told her cabinet colleagues that the president has assured them of sending some old Buddhist statues.

She said private banks would help the government in the rehabilitation programmes.

Muslim fanatics torched 12 pagodas and damaged six others and 50 houses on September 29 night in Ramu. After Ramu, a few more attacks were carried out in Teknaf and Ukhia.

Hasina directed the ministers, state ministers and lawmakers to be alert during the upcoming largest festival of the Hindus as she feels there could be a conspiracy like the one in Ramu.

The premier also pointed out that such plots were being hatched worldwide. "So everybody [ministers and state ministers] must remain alert and watchful in their locality so that no vested quarters can play games again," she was quoted as saying by a minister.

QUIET FESTIVALS
Leaders of Buddhist community in Chittagong yesterday said they would have subdued Shubho Probarona Purnima and Kathin Chibor Dan Utsab festivities to protest against the recent attacks on Buddhists and their pagodas in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong.

Announcing the protest programme at a press conference at Chittagong Press Club yesterday, Buddhist leaders said they would wear black badges during their religious festivals which begins on October 29, reports our staff correspondent in Chittagong.

The press conference was held under the banner of Bangladesh Sammito Boudha Samaj, a platform of several Buddhist organisations formed after the recent violence. Ajit Ranjan Barua, chairman of Bangladesh Boudha Samity, a compo-

nent of the platform, said the Buddhist community had been observing the Probarona Purnima with fanfare and had arranged different cultural programmes.

He said this year their celebrations would be subdued.

The Shubho Probarona Purnima is the second largest festival of the Buddhist community.

Ajit said they would continue their protest programme during the month-long Kothin Chibor Dan Utsab, which starts a day after Probarona, at all pagodas in the country.

Accusing the law enforcement agencies of inaction during the attack, Ajit demanded finding the criminals through proper investigation.

Ajit demanded immediate reconciliation between Buddhist and Muslim communities in the country and restoration of the damaged and burnt down pagodas.

HC ORDER
The High Court yesterday directed the government to submit a report to it by November 6 on the security measures it had taken before and after the attacks on the Buddhist community in Ramu.

The court passed the order during the hearing on a writ petition that challenged the government inaction in preventing the violence in Ramu on September 29 that eventually spread to Ukhia, Teknaf and Chittagong on September 30.

The High Court bench of Justice Naima Haider and Justice Muhammad Khurshid Alam Sarkar said the court would pass further orders on November 6 after receiving the report.

Supreme Court lawyer Eunus Ali Akond on October 3 filed the writ petition saying that local law enforcers failed to take appropriate measures to protect the temples, monasteries and houses of the minority communities.

Eunus Ali on October 14 also filed a supplementary petition seeking the court's order on the authorities concerned to pay damages to the victims of the violence.

The court yesterday also said it would hold hearing on November 6 on the supplementary petition that sought its directive for forming a judicial commission to investigate the matter.

During yesterday's proceedings, Deputy Attorney General Moklesur Rahman told the court that the government had taken security measures after the violence and a report would be submitted to the court.

Meanwhile, ruling party MPs of Cox's Bazar and other public representatives yesterday at the meeting of the district's law and order monitoring committee blasted police officials for negligence during the September 29 mayhem.

MPs, including Abdur Rahman Bodi of Cox's Bazar-4, gave specific examples of negligence of officer-in-charge of Ramu Police Station and Superintendent of Police of Cox's Bazar on that night.

The OC and SP were not present in the meeting yesterday.

Talking to reporters after his Ramu visit, Inspector General of Police Hassan Mahmood Khandker said necessary actions would be taken if any police official was found to have neglected his or her duty on that night.

Sonali DGM

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remand yesterday in three separate cases filed over the Hall-Mark loan scam.

Metropolitan Magistrate Anwar Sadaat passed the order after the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) investigators produced AKM Azizur Rahman, also the bank's deputy general manager, before the court in the afternoon and sought his remand for 30 days.

The defence lawyer, however, appealed for cancellation of the remand prayers saying that there was no legal basis to put him on remand.

Before Azizur was produced before the court, he had been taken to the ACC's Shegunbagicha office around 1:30pm for a preliminary interrogation.

Rab personnel arrested Azizur at Rampura in the capital Sunday night. Suspended on June 6, he is said to have been the key person behind the loan scandal.

A Bangladesh Bank investigation found that the branch had lent Hall-Mark Group and five other companies Tk 3,547 crore between 2010 and May this year on forged documents. Of the amount, Hall-Mark alone took Tk 2,667 crore.

The ACC conducted an enquiry and later filed 11 cases against 27 people, including 20 former and present officials of Sonali Bank, and seven officials of the Hall-Mark Group.

The anti-graft body has so far grilled 50 Sonali Bank and Hall-Mark Group officials in connection with the country's largest scam.

Arrest real killers of Sagar, Runi

Journo leaders set Nov 24 deadline

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Journalist leaders yesterday set a fresh deadline till November 24 for arresting the "real killers" of journalist couple Sagar Sarwar and Mehrun Runi.

They stressed the need for proper investigation to find out the motive of the killing, and also declared to hold a grand rally on October 25 to this end.

"As four of the arrestees are professional killers, the journalist community wants to know who had used them to kill the couple and what was their motive," said Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury at a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club.

The president of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) demanded the government find out the culprits who had masterminded the killings.

Sagar Sarwar, news editor of private channel Maarsanga Television, and his wife Mehrun Runi, senior reporter of TV channel ATN Bangla, were killed in their West Rajabazar home in the city on February 11.

On October 9, the home minister named seven suspects in the brutal murder of the journalist couple.

During yesterday's press briefing, the journalist leaders placed various other demands including the right to establish trade union in all media houses, regular salary based on journalists' wage board and payment of arrears.

They will also hold a rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club on November 8 in support of their demands.

Ruhul Amin Gazi, president of another faction of the BFUJ, also spoke on the occasion.

Not all media

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were invited to cover a meeting of the Awami League Parliamentary Board at the Gono Bhaban, with party President Sheikh Hasina in the chair.

But much to the surprise of the newsmen, the Prime Ministers' Office in the afternoon asked television, print media and news agency journalists not to go there to cover her programme.

All the reporters concerned were suggested to collect the event's report from the state-run Bangladesh Television and news agency BSS and private news agencies UNB and bdnews24.com. The reporters and TV camera crews have also been asked not to join the 26th convocation ceremony of the Islamic University of Technology in Gazipur this morning, where the prime minister will be the chief guest, said some TV journalists.

Earlier in the morning, the prime minister at a cabinet meeting at the secretariat expressed resentment over the poor coverage of her programmes on private TV channels and a section of newspapers.

Some ministers said she would not allow the private TV stations to cover her programmes as they broadcast those in the seventh or eighth serial in their bulletins. Over the last few months, the premier had been critical of a section of the media for censoring the government and downplaying its good deeds and achievements. She also blasted the participants of television talkshows.

Asked about the restriction, a senior minister said let the media wait for a few days to understand the importance of the head of the government's news.

Sources said Information Minister Hasanul Haque Inu would soon sit with the owners of private television channels and newspapers separately to deal with the broadcasting and publishing of the head of the government's news, a senior minister told this newspaper.

Contacted, a PMO official said the restriction on the media was only a temporary measure.

Despite repeated attempts, the Daily Star could not reach prime minister's Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad over the phone for his comments on the restriction.

Titas reserves revised thru' seismic survey

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The state-run Petrobangla yesterday revised the gas reserves at Titas gas field up by 800 billion cubic feet to 8,051 trillion cubic feet after analysing a three-dimensional seismic survey result.

Officials say the field also holds two more zones with a potential reserve of an additional 1.0 tcf of gas. It will, however, require drilling before the existence of the economically viable gas can be confirmed, the officials add.

Of the latest 8,051 tcf reserves, about 5,635 tcf is economically recoverable, Prof Hossain Monsur, chairman of Petrobangla, told reporters at his office in the capital.

He said Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration & Production Company Ltd (Bapex) had detected the additional reserves after analysing 10 gas sands at the field.

Bapex conducted the 3-D

seismic survey last year under a government-run project to pinpoint some new small gas reserves in the field that could be tapped into.

The Hydrocarbon Unit of the power, energy and mineral resources ministry and Petrobangla had earlier put the reserves at 7,325 tcf and 7,232 tcf respectively.

As of August this year, about 3.44 tcf gas has been produced from the field. As a result, about 2,195 tcf gas still remains recoverable, said Bapex Managing Director Mortuza Ahmad Faruque.

He said the survey result has opened up a new window for the country. "We were not certain about some sand zones following a 2-D survey. The 3-D seismic survey has enabled us to reach areas where we could not reach in the past."

"We will be able to assess the reserves of the field on the basis of the new result," he added.

Bangladesh's current reserve of gas stands at 12 to

15 tcf, which will meet the country's gas demand for the next 20 to 25 years at the current rate of consumption, said Monsur.

Geologists say the 3-D seismic survey, however, does not give a clear picture of any reserve, which was evident recently.

Two years ago, based on a three-dimensional survey in three fields -- Moulavibazar, Bibiyana and Jalalabad -- US energy giant Chevron had proposed to increase gas production by 940 million cubic feet per day, saying that those had additional reserve.

But its three-dimensional survey proved to be wrong when the company last year drilled two wells in Moulavibazar and found no additional gas. Following this failure, the company had slashed its projection initially to 500 mmcf and in July this year to 300 mmcf.

Mehrul Hasan, geophysicist and party chief of Bapex, made a presentation on the survey.

Country halves

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The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) released the SOFI-2012 in Rome last week to mark the World Food Day.

Considering 1990 as the base year, halving the prevalence of hunger by 2015 is set as one of the major achievable United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

The SOFI-2012, however, depicted that during the same period (1990-2012), the number of people living in hunger in Bangladesh has reduced from 37 million (1990) to 25 million (2012) this year.

FAO measures hunger as, "The number of people who do not consume the minimum daily energy requirement, which is the amount of calories needed for light activity and a minimum acceptable weight for attained height. On average, a person needs about 1,800 kilo calories per day as a minimum energy intake."

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury

termed the development a great achievement. She was, however, prompt in emphasising that the country needs to further reduce population growth rate.

According to SOFI, Bangladesh fared well if compared in the global and regional perspective.

In 1990, the number of global hungry population was one billion, which now stands at 868 million, and the number of people hungry in South Asia was 325 million in the base year, which still remains as high as 304 million.

And prevalence of hunger in terms of percentage of total population is 17.6 in South Asia (in 2012), which is higher than Bangladesh's hunger prevalence of 16.8 percent.

Global hunger prevalence is down to 12.5 percent now compared to 18.6 percent back in 1990, and as per MDG, it has to be brought further down to 9.3 percent by the target year 2015.

Late last week, releasing a global hunger index (GHI), the Washington-based food policy think tank -- International Food Policy

Research Institute (IFPRI) -- said Bangladesh goes two steps up in the GHI this year to 68th position from 70th last year.

The GHI report, jointly prepared with two NGOs -- Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe -- shows global hunger has declined since 1990 but still remains at a level characterised as "serious".

Matia Chowdhury said, "Having the MDG goals achieved is not enough. Besides eradicating hunger, we have to make sure people have nutritious food."

She added, "We need talents in the country and to have talented people, we have to upgrade our national nutrition level."

Contacted, Food Minister Abdur Razzaque shared the agriculture minister's views. "We have come a long way in making food available and accessible to people thanks to expanded social safety net programmes. But the challenge remains enormous on how to provide people with proteins -- milk, egg, meat etc. We need to enhance our national nutrition level," said Razzaque.

PM flays TIB

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Of those surveyed, 53.5 percent MPs carried out criminal activities in person.

Talking to her ministers after the weekly cabinet meeting, Hasina said the report was not correct, meeting sources told The Daily Star, adding that a number of ministers and state ministers echoed the prime minister's view.

"What is the motive behind publishing this report at a time when an expert panel of the World Bank is visiting Bangladesh?" a meeting source quoted Hasina as saying.

The prime minister also wondered about the expert panel's meeting with eminent jurist Dr Kamal Hossain and a few others on Sunday.

Contacted, TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman yesterday said, "Yes it [the survey] is motivated. But the motive is to strengthen the country's democracy."

"The purpose of this report is to draw attention to the existing gaps [between lawmakers] so that the MPs have the opportunity to review their own role and to improve their democratic practices and performances as desired by the people."

But Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury said the TIB report was aimed at impeding democracy and "inviting" undemocratic forces.

"They [TIB] want to weaken the foundation of

the democracy through publishing this kind of motivated report and invite some other system," she said.

"Why has the TIB come up with this kind of report now? What is its motive?" Matia asked, adding that the TIB had also published a motivated report in 2001.

Earlier on Saturday, Hasina referred to the 2001 TIB report that labelled Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in the world. The report was completely fabricated and it was published in June that year (the AL was in power till July 13, 2001) to mislead the people, the prime minister said, adding that it was published to prevent her party from coming to power.

Talking to The Daily Star, Matia yesterday asked the TIB to publish the names of the corrupt MPs. She alleged a top official of the TIB took the initiative of the survey having been failed to participate in the 2008 parliamentary election. She, however, did not name the TIB official.

Matia, a presidium member of the AL, also questioned TIB's taking foreign fund to publish reports against democracy.

"It is funny how the TIB calls into question the democracy with foreign money," she said, asking where the anti-graft body had been during the last military-backed caretaker government.

Worker's Party lawmaker Rashed Khan Menon said the way the TIB

did the survey was not acceptable at all.

According to him, the purpose of the study was to erode people's confidence in MPs and parliament, thus hindering the progress of democracy.

Rejecting the TIB report outright, AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif said, "This survey report has been published to encourage those who want to see unelected government in power."

AL MP Tarana Halim said there were many contradictions in the TIB report. People would get a wrong message about all lawmakers from the report, which she said was misleading.

The TIB should not have published such an "incomplete report", she added.

BNP Standing Committee member Moudud Ahmed said the TIB report reflected "exactly what we were saying about the ruling party lawmakers".

Dhaka University Vice-Chancellor Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique said people expected the lawmakers to remain above all kinds of corruption and misdeeds. But he added that the TIB should explain to the people the survey methodology.

Of the 149 lawmakers surveyed by the TIB, 141 are male and eight female while 136 are treasury bench lawmakers (27 ministers or state ministers) and 13 opposition lawmakers. The surveyed MPs were not named in the report.

No passport

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and migrant workers.

About 530 people work in the 34 passport offices across the country. Applications for the MRPs are accepted at all the offices, but those are produced only at the Agargaon office.

The Malaysian firm was selected in 2010 for the MRP and MRV (machine-readable visa) project worth Tk 526 crore for a period of two and a half years. The army was assigned to implement the project.

As the contract expired of March 31, the company was repeatedly pursuing the Department of Immigration and Passport (DIP), the home ministry and the army to renew the contract. The government also failed to recruit necessary manpower and to train them.

"We continued with the project considering national interest and the importance of the MRP. We have withdrawn our staff as we can't do it for an indefinite period without a contract," said Syed Ahsan Habib, a local consultant for the project.

"We informed the authorities about the renewal of our contract three months before it expired."

The firm also issued a number of letters to the project authorities and held meetings with them. Later, the deadline was extended until September 30.

"Every time we wrote letters or pushed for renewal, they assured us of doing it quickly," he said, adding that they extended the deadline by two weeks upon request by the project officials assuring renewal of the contract within the extended time.

He also blamed inefficiency of the project authorities for not renewing the contract, a claim refuted by the project director.

Sources in the Agargaon office said the proposal to renew the contract had been sent to the home ministry several times, but it was sent back "due to flaws in the proposal".

Project Director Brig Gen Refayet Ullah said the home ministry could say better why the contract was not renewed or the necessary manpower could not be recruited.

He said proposals to recruit manpower, renewal of the contract and transfer of the equipment were sent to the home ministry several times.

Refaatet also denied any negligence or inefficiency in the project. "There is no project in Bangladesh which is being implemented as efficiently as ours," he claimed.

He, however, said the MRP project could be run more properly if some constraints could have been removed. "We alone don't operate the project," he said.

Asked who would be responsible if there was a chaos at the passport offices today due to the withdrawal of IRIS staff, the project director said the project officials would be blamed alone if anything happened like that.

Meanwhile, the Director General of DIP Abdul Mabud yesterday issued a letter again requesting the IRIS to continue their job for some more days.

"I could not see the letter as it was issued at the eleventh hour yesterday," said consultant Habib, adding that they got many such letters since April.

Syria denies use of cluster bombs

AFP, Damascus

The Syrian army yesterday denied using cluster munitions and said it did not possess the weapon in its arsenal, in a statement published by state news agency SANA.

"Some news outlets that are complicit in the blood-letting in Syria have been publishing false reports that the Syrian army has been using cluster bombs against armed terrorists," it said, adding the military "does not have this kind of weapon."