

Palestinians

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Abbas will make the case for Palestine to become a "non-member UN observer state" and set out possible conditions for talks with Israel in a key speech to the 193-member assembly.

The Palestinian president sat and listened to Ban's warning at a special UN committee meeting on the decades-old conflict ahead of his speech.

The UN secretary general said only "direct negotiations" between the Palestinians and Israelis could lead to a permanent settlement.

And he urged Israeli and Palestinian leaders "to breathe new life into the peace process which is now on life support" because of the deadlock in the peace process between the rivals.

Talks between the two have been suspended since September, 2010 with the Palestinians blaming Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.

"What is needed now is political will and courage. Leaders must show a historic sense of responsibility and vision. Israelis and Palestinians must break out of the zero-sum mentality," Ban said.

The landmark General Assembly meeting will be held on the 65th anniversary of a UN resolution on the division of the Palestinian territories into a two-state solution that Ban said "remains tragically unfulfilled".

The Palestinians are assured of the simple majority required for the resolution, despite an aggressive campaign against the measure by the United States and Israel.

Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Malki said the Palestinian leadership was "proud of the just support for the cause of Palestine emanating from all corners of the globe."

"We appeal to you to stand firm for peace, for the rule of law and for right over might," Malki told ministers and ambassadors at the UN committee.

"Despite diminishing hopes and the decline of the situation on the ground due to Israeli violations we remain committed to the two state solution and our hand remains extended in peace," he added.

The Palestinians say 132 countries recognize their state bilaterally, but the number of countries that will back them in the vote

remains uncertain.

Europe is divided, with a majority of the 27-nation European Union, including France, expected to back the Palestinians.

But Germany said it would abstain and Britain was expected to follow because of doubts over the timing of the vote.

The recent Israeli military onslaught against rocket attacks from Gaza could increase support for the Palestinians, diplomats said.

But several European countries, including some backing the bid, believe the Palestinians should have waited until after US President Barack Obama installed his new administration and Israel held elections, diplomats said.

The United States, a staunch ally of Israel, has warned that the vote will do nothing to improve the prospects for new peace talks aimed at ending the decades-long conflict.

"We have made very clear to the Palestinian leadership that we oppose Palestinian efforts to upgrade their status at the UN outside of the framework" of talks with Israel, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Wednesday.

Israeli leader Netanyahu said Thursday that the UN decision "won't change anything on the ground."

"It won't promote the creation of a Palestinian state, it will distance it," he added.

Success will give the Palestinians access to UN agencies and treaties and potentially allow them to apply to join the International Criminal Court -- a prospect that worries Israel.

Palestinian envoys have said Abbas will not rush to join the court but could use it if Israel does not change its policies on settlements and other matters.

The United States blocked a Palestinian application for full membership of the United Nations that Abbas made in September 2011.

The Palestinian Authority and UN agencies that admit the Palestinians could lose hundreds of millions of dollars in financing because of the vote. US law prohibits funding for any international body recognizing a Palestinian state.

Washington has warned Abbas he risks losing around \$200 million in aid, which is blocked in the US Congress.

The last call

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villagers whose sons and daughters had been working with the garment factory.

"I checked every toilet until I found him [Polash] on the third floor," she said with tears rolling down her cheeks.

"He had that black shirt wrapped around his waist," Moyna said before she lapsed into silence.

Moyna does not know what is awaiting her in the days to come. The next hurdle for the remaining four members of the family, who were all dependent on Palash, is to search a means of living.

The case of her neighbouring family is no less painful.

Its four members -- Nazrul Islam, his wife Amena Khatun, son Nayan Mian and daughter-in-law Monira Begum -- could not be identified among the 111 who perished in the fire.

"What will happen to me now," said a helpless Chobera Begum, Nazrul's mother, as all the earning members of the family had died.

Earlier on Monday, the bodies of the identified victims were sent to Latipur village in Mithapukur upazila and buried. In the entire upazila, a total of 37, including 24 women, died in the inferno.

Meanwhile, Farid Ahmed, deputy commissioner of Rangpur, has allocated Tk 25,000 for each of the families who lost their children and Tk.15,000 for the people who were injured in the country's worst garment factory fire.

It's for saving

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question of declaring state of emergency does not arise!" the premier said while giving her closing speech at the 15th session of parliament.

"My question before the countrymen is whether she [Khaleda] is enforcing [agitation] programmes in the month of victory to bring emergency in," said Hasina, also the Awami League president.

"Those for whom she [Khaleda] wants to bring the emergency will take the benefits. She will not get benefit," said the prime minister citing the previous emergency declared in 2007 by then president Iajuddin Ahmed, who was elected by the BNP.

Hasina urged the BNP chief to return to parliament and speak what she wanted to say. "Do not push the country towards destruction. Do not try to take revenge against the countrymen," she said.

In her 37-minute-long speech, the premier criticised Khaleda for announcing programmes in December.

From Wednesday's rally, the opposition leader announced various programmes including a countrywide road blockade on December 9 to press home its demand for the restoration of caretaker government system.

Hasina alleged that Khaleda announced the agitation programmes in the month of victory to "save the war criminals". "It is a shame for the nation. I leave it to the countrymen to judge," she added.

The premier said the opposition leader "constituted the 18-party alliance with the war criminals and killers," who were also present with her at Wednesday's rally.

Referring to the latest constitutional amendment, the premier said: "We believe in people's empowerment. We have well ensured the protection of parliamentary democracy and people's empowerment through the amendment."

She also rejected the opposition's demand for restoration of the caretaker government system and cited some remarks the BNP chief had made earlier "against the system".

Hasina claimed that all the elections during the present government were held "free and fair". "The Election Commission will conduct the next parliamentary polls," she added.

During her speech, the premier narrated her government's various development activities, and anticipated that all those activities would be stopped "if the BNP-led alliance comes to power".

The 15th session of the parliament, which began on November 14 amid boycott by the BNP-led opposition MPs, was prorogued last night after 10 sitting days.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Two men, holding in their arms their one-year-old baby sons, yesterday show the photos of their wives, who perished in the Tazreen fashions fire on Saturday.

Too young to understand the shock

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Mahfuza is presumed to be among the 53 dead whose bodies were charred beyond recognition. The unidentified were buried in Jurain graveyard.

Mitu and Mahfuza had been working at Tazreen for the last two years. They married Saddam Hossain and Abdul Jabbar, brothers.

The widowers were wandering from one end to the other of Nishchintapur village yesterday looking blankly and holding their sons close to their chests.

Ruins and wreckage of the burnt factory are what they now roam around in gloom and despair in search for help.

"We do not know how we

will lead the rest of our lives with the motherless kids," said Saddam, "We have to work for survival without anyone to take care of our poor sons."

The brothers came from Bhurungamari of Kurigram looking for livelihoods in the capital more than half a decade ago and got jobs as garment workers in Nishchintapur of Ashulia on the outskirts of the capital.

Jabbar married Mahfuza around six years ago while Saddam took Mitu as wife five years ago. They had been living in the same neighbourhood ever since.

"My son is missing his mother and has stopped eating...he refuses to go to anyone else," said Saddam,

adding, "I am now penniless... I had to spend all my money to take my wife's body to Rangpur for burial...I can't afford to feed him."

"I can neither leave my son with anyone nor can I go to work," said Saddam, who works at a nearby garment factory.

Jabbar said his son too has stopped eating as Mahfuza used to feed her son and play with him during breaks while at work.

"What do we do now?" he said.

At least 111 garments workers perished at the factory Saturday night in the worst industrial fire in the country.

RMG fire safety

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He said they would submit a report to the home ministry on Monday with recommendations for punitive measures against factories with dismal safety systems.

Salam said they might recommend cancellation of fire service licences of non-compliant factories.

The fire service will then send mobile courts led by executive magistrates to non-compliant factories to penalise them for their failure to ensure workers' safety.

Salam said they did not find any factory without a fire safety system, but many of the factories did not fully comply with the directives of the fire service.

Those factories did not organise monthly fire drills or arrange training for workers and staff. Fire extinguishers were not even refilled in many factories, he said.

Each of the 15 teams has been asked to inspect at least five factories a day. Of the 5,000 apparel factories in the country, about 500 are located in Ashulia.

During the drive, the teams checked whether the factories had adequate fire-fighting equipment, emergency fire exits and evacuation arrangements, and if they had trained workers to tackle fire incidents.

Salam said his team had inspected five factories in Jirabo and found that two factories -- Sharp Dyeing and Printing Industries Ltd, and Lorex Fashions Ltd -- did not have adequate fire-fighting equipment.

The validity of fire-fighting equipment at the two factories had expired and the workers had not been given training to use them, he said.

Sources said the owners and officials of the two apparel plants had fled their factories sensing the presence of the inspection team.

"We did not find them in their factories," said Salam.

Mokter Hossain, deputy director of industrial police in Ashulia, said police had accompanied the fire service teams to the factories.

In the meantime, a committee probing Saturday's fire incident found that Abdur Razzak, production manager at Tazreen Fashions, had been the main culprit for so many deaths in the deadly blaze.

"Though the fire alarm went off, the production manager did not allow the workers to get out of the factory," said Salam, who is a member of the probe committee formed by the home ministry.

In their statements, the survivors of the fire alleged that Razzak had misled the workers saying it was a regular

fire drill, not a fire incident.

"As a result, the workers could not get out in time and got trapped in the fire," said Salam.

He said the team was yet to talk to the factory owner and officials, as they were not available.

Additionally, the labour and employment ministry had moved to form a task force to supervise safety measures in garment factories, labour secretary Mikail Shipar told a parliamentary body.

"The task force will be composed of representatives from the government, garment owners and workers and headed by the minister or the state minister," Shipar told reporters after a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on the labour and employment ministry.

He said the task force would visit at least 20 factories every month to see if the plants were complying with safety regulations.

Mikail Shipar also said the labour directorate on November 27 filed cases with labour courts against Delowar Hossain, managing director of Tazreen Fashions.

"The owner simply cannot shirk his responsibility," he said.

Israfil Alam, chief of the parliamentary body, told reporters that the committee had recommended stern action against those responsible for the deadly fire.

The lawmaker said the committee did not want to make any comments or point fingers at individuals. "It is under investigation and we believe the truth will come out through investigation."

Meeting sources said the committee members were annoyed by the absence of Labour Minister Rajiuddin Ahmed Raju and State Minister Monnujan Sufian.

AHM Anwar Pasha, executive magistrate of Dhaka district, said if a factory did not have any fire-fighting equipment then its owner could be sent to jail for up to six months along with the imposition of a fine, Anwar Pasha told The Daily Star.

Queried about his department's failure to inspect every factory seeking renewals of fire licences, fire service Director Salam said, "It is not possible for our officials to ensure proper inspection at every factory during renewal of fire licences, as the number of inspectors is very poor

compared to that of factories."

Five days into the deadly fire at Tazreen Fashions, the garment makers yesterday decided to form a high-powered committee to ensure upgrade of fire safety apparatus at RMG production units.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association said it would soon form a task force and set a time limit for the garment owners to upgrade fire safety measures at their factories.

"If the owners do not upgrade fire safety measures, the task force will shut down their plants," said BGMEA President Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin.

Meanwhile, some 300 people, including university students, journalists and artists, joined a protest outside the BGMEA building in the city's Karwan Bazar yesterday to demand justice for the victims of the fire incident.

Our Chittagong correspondent reports: the fire service will start inspecting garment factories in the port city from Sunday to find out whether the plants have adequate fire safety equipment.

Md Abdul Mannan, assistant director of the fire service, said the service had been instructed to form a team to inspect garment factories in Chittagong and submit a report.

100 hurt

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injuring around 80 people in the stampede, said Abul Baten, deputy assistant director of Industrial Police (Savar Zone).

Shimul Saha, an official of Enam Medical College and Hospital said 63 of the injured were undergoing treatment at the hospital. Eight of them were in critical condition.

Meanwhile, in a separate incident at Hemayetpur, around 16 people were injured in a stampede at Crescent Leather, a shoe-manufacturing factory.

No casualty was reported in the incident, as the factory workers had managed to douse the fire with assistance from the locals by the time the fire fighters arrived.

The fire originated from a short circuit from an electric motor around 2:45pm on the ground floor of the three-storied factory building, said Fire Service and Civil Defence officials.

They injured were being treated at different hospitals and clinics, police said.

Biggest ever

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gratitude to the artistes and organizers.

Speaking as special guest, Pankaj Saran, Indian high commissioner to Dhaka, said the eyes of the world of classical music were now on Dhaka.

He added that the joint effort of Bengal Group and ITC was an excellent instance of corporate social responsibility and corporate social governance.

Earlier, Bengal Group Chairman Abul Khair thanked everyone who made the dream of arranging such an event come true, and especially media partners Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, Maasranga TV and ABC Radio, and all those who have supported their endeavours.

Ravi Mathur, executive director of ITC-SRA, announced plans of the organisation to continue its support for the preservation and propagation of classical music, while also promoting Bangladeshi artistes through music festivals and programmes in India.

Long before the gates opened, people from all walks of life had queued at the entrance to the stadium, waiting to enjoy vocal, instrumental and dance performances of the music stalwarts.

Ustad Ali Ahmed Hussain, along with Pandit Samar Saha on Tabla, was the first maestro on stage, mesmerising the audience with the magic of his Shehnai.

The other artistes of the night were Omkar Dadarkar (vocal), Ustad Shahadat Hossain (Sarod), Vidushi Sujata Mohapatra (Odissi), Waseem Ahmed Khan (vocal), Ustad Shahid Parvez (Vocal), Pandit Uday Bhawalkar (vocal), Pandit Tejendra N Majumdar (Sarod) and Pandit Ajoy Chakrabarty (vocal).

The first day of the festival was dedicated to Sangeetsadhak Waheedul Haque.

Today's programmes, to be held at the same venue from 5:00pm till 4:30am tomorrow, will be inaugurated by Home Minister

Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir.

The second day of the festival, dedicated to Sarod Maestro Ustad Vilayat Khan, will feature Rajrupa Chowdhury (Sarod), Deboshree Bhattacharjee (vocal), Yashwant Vaishnav (Tabla), Adnan Khan (Sitar), Sandip Bhattacharjee (vocal), Kaushiki Desikan (vocal), Ustad Mashkoor Ali Khan (vocal), Pandit Buddhadev Dasgupta (Sarod), Ustad Rashid Khan (Vocal) and Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma (Santoor).

The festival is being jointly organised by Bengal Foundation and the ITC-Sangeet Research Academy of Kolkata to promote, nurture and celebrate the shared legacy of classical music in Bangladesh.

Participated by a total of 100 artistes and maestros, the entire festival is dedicated to the memory of the legendary Ustad Alauddin Khan.

Freezing

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Society Ltd (DMCSL), its former joint secretary Azad Rahman, former treasurer Akbar Hossain Sumon, and six former DMCSL officials Shirin Akhter, Rafiqul Islam Sarkar, Majibur Rahman, Sumon Ali Khan, Saidul Islam Khan Rubel and Abul Kalam Azad.

The nine officials deposited a total of Tk 1.13 crore at 71 bank accounts on different dates, the ACC official said in his petition.

Earlier the same court ordered to freeze 537 bank accounts of Destiny Group officials including Destiny Group Chairman Mohammad Rafiqul Amin.

Moreover, the court on Tuesday directed the ACC to confiscate all the properties of the controversial business group.

The court also asked the anti-graft body to confiscate personal properties of the Destiny Group chairman, his wife Farah Diba and Destiny 2000 Chairman Mohammad Hossain.

The ACC on July 31 sued 22 officials of the group for laundering Tk 3,285.26 crore by cheating investors.

Caught in a loan

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by paying Tk 7,000 and had her admitted to Pongu Hospital in the capital on the same day.

By yesterday, all his money was gone and he was thinking of selling his five decimals of land, which is all he has to sell.

Under the Labour Law 2006, companies are bound to pay for the treatment of workers if they are injured during work hours. But Tazreen Fashions has yet to make any such arrangements for any of the injury victims.

"My relatives do not want me to sell the land. But I have no other way to arrange money for her [Amela's] treatment," Babul told The Daily Star yesterday.

The couple came to Dhaka early this year to find work.

"We wanted to sell the cow at a higher price after a few years. But the fire has shattered my dreams."

The Bablu-Amela couple, however, are not the only ones to have their dreams burnt in the fire.

The families of some 100 other injured workers are struggling to afford treatment and medicine for their loved ones.

Already, many of them have fallen into loan traps. With their monthly wages and borrowed money already spent on treatment, they are looking for more loans.

Jaitun Begum, another injured worker, is one of them.

"I could not buy medicine today," she said.

An operator at Tazreen, Jaitun has borrowed Tk 3,000 for her treatment and needs more money. She too suffered injuries in her legs from jumping from the building to escape the deadly blaze on the fateful night.

There is more. Mazeda Begum and Sathi Akter have run out of their savings and

have borrowed money. And they need more money for their treatment.

"I don't know how I will run my family. I don't know how I will repay the Tk 5,500 loan," said Sathi, the main income generator of a four-member family.

An operator, she earns between Tk 4,500 and Tk 5,000 a month.

Of her income, Tk 1,620 goes for her room rent and Tk 1,000 for her younger brother's food and education in a madrasa. The rest is spent on food and other household needs and medicine for her father.

"We cannot pay our full bills at the grocery shop. Every month, there are some dues," she said.

That is the situation she will face every month perhaps, but her big worry now is her treatment. She does not know, however, where the money will come from.

Yesterday she and Amela each got Tk 2,000 for their treatment from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

But they and many of those injured need more. And they need it badly and urgently.

Roadside blast kills 10 in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar

A roadside bomb killed 10 civilians, including a woman and five children, and wounded eight when it ripped through a van in southern Afghanistan yesterday, officials said.

The families were on their way to visit a relative who had recently returned from Makkah when their vehicle was hit in Dih Rawud district in rural Uruzgan province, district governor Nematullah Khaliqi told AFP.