

Thai PM

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related to trade and investment with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to strengthen partnership between Bangladesh and Thailand," she told the "Business Networking Dinner".

"We will increase our cooperation with Bangladesh government to increase trade and investment."

Shinawatra, who assumed the office of prime minister in July last year, said food industry was another area that deserves attention.

"We will enhance our cooperation in food and agriculture sector -- especially on halal food sector," she said, adding that she had already asked her deputies to explore these areas.

Speaking on the occasion, FBCCI President Kazi Akramuddin Ahmed sought duty-free access for Bangladeshi products to Thailand to help grow the trade volume.

Presently, Bangladesh exporters do not get tariff facilities in Thailand, he said, adding: "As a less developing country and member of the World Trade Organisation, we request your government to provide duty-free access for all Bangladeshi products to the Thai market," said Ahmed.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, Commerce Minister GM Quader, Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Faruk Khan, FBCCI first Vice-president Monwarah Hakim Ali, Vice-president M Helal Uddin, FBCCI directors, diplomats, business leaders and top government officials attended the dinner, among others.

Addressing the programme, Muhith said Bangladesh had many things to learn from Thailand that had had great achievements in various areas.

"We expect much better trade with Thailand...there's a scope for further expansion of trade and investment," the ministers said.

Bangladesh's export to Thailand was worth \$51.43 million and import \$879.52 million in 2011-2012. "We believe that more trade and investment can reduce the trade gap," said the FBCCI president.

"We now feel that more than trading, we need strategic partnership not only with Thailand but also with our neighbours like India and Myanmar," he added.

According to him, it is time to activate and implement the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sector Technical and Economical Cooperation.

"Our cooperation should be widened regionally and bilaterally by establishing land routes to Thailand through Myanmar, exporting manpower, initiating cooperation between ASEAN and Saarc, attracting foreign investment...collaborating in hospital management, building capacity in nurses' training and promoting tourism."

Ahmed said Bangladeshis spend millions of dollars every year for treatment in Thailand, and invited Thai investors to set up world-class hospitals, diagnostic centres and hotels in Bangladesh.

Earlier in the day, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina received Shinawatra at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

She was given a guard of honour there.

The Thai PM is leading a 108-member delegation, including Commerce Minister Boonsong Teriyaprom, Foreign Minister Surapong Tovichakchaikul and PM's Office Ministers Niwattamong Boonsongpaisan and Sansanee Nakpong.

Shinawatra is scheduled to visit the National Mausoleum in Savar and Bangabandhu Museum at Dhanmondi-32 in the capital today.

Hasina will host a lunch in honour of her Thai counterpart at Sonargaon Hotel.

Shinawatra will also have talks with Opposition Leader and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Foreign Minister Dipu Moni before leaving for Bangkok around 4:00pm today.

14-party demo today

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alliance government assumed power.

Holding trial of war criminals is one of the key electoral pledges of the AL.

The mass rallies and processions will begin at 2:30 pm in all divisional headquarters, district and upazila towns and in the capital, Mrinal Kanti Das, deputy office secretary of AL, told The Daily Star.

In Dhaka, the mass rally will set off from in front of the south gate of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque. The alliance has taken measures to assemble a large number of people in the rally, party sources said.

A mass procession will also begin from in front of the mosque and end at Suhrawardy Udyan after parading the streets near Noor Hossain Square, Paltan intersection, National Press Club and Matsya Bhaban.

Senior leaders of the 14-party alliance will speak at the rally and from where they will announce their next course of programmes.

Leaders of the ruling combine held a series of meetings for the last several days to make today's programmes a success.

MEETING WITH STUDENT ORGANISATIONS

The 14-party yesterday held

a view exchange meeting with its student and youth organisations at AL President Sheikh Hasina's political office in Dhanmondi with a view of making today's programme a success.

Addressing the meeting as the chief guest, AL stalwart Amir Hossain Amu said punishment to the war criminals would have to be ensured through completing their trials immediately to establish the rule of law in the country.

DHAKA CITY 14-PARTY MEETING

A meeting of the 14-party combine's city units was held at the central office of the AL on Bangabandhu Avenue where another AL stalwart Tofail Ahmed said BNP-Jamaat had been conspiring at both home and abroad to protect war criminals.

"We will continue our street programmes until March 26, and hope that the war crimes trial will be completed by then," he said adding that Khaleda Zia's reception programme for freedom fighters was a mockery.

Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury said, "We liberated the country in 1971 under the leadership of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

"This time, we will foil all the conspiracies of BNP-Jamaat under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina and compel Khaleda Zia to surrender."

AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif termed the BNP an agent of Pakistan and aide of war criminals as it had declared programmes in the month of victory to thwart the trial.

The AL leaders urged all to make today's 14-party mass procession a success.

38 Shibir men

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commissioner (Media and Community Service) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, told The Daily Star last night.

Meanwhile, a statement signed by Shibir's central Publicity Secretary Abu Saleh Md Yahya said the arrestees include Sazzad Hossain and Golam Kibria, president and secretary of Shibir Dhaka City (West) unit.

The statement said the government was trying to "uproot" Jamaat-Shibir as part of its attempt to suppress the opposition and the "arrest" of the leaders and activists was part of this "conspiracy".

Assistant Commissioner Rabiul, however, said the detectives detained them in connection with the recent attacks carried out by Jamaat and Shibir men in the capital.

Several hundred people including a large number of policemen were injured during dozens of clashes between law enforcers and Jamaat-Shibir men in the capital and across the country recently. There had been wholesale vandalism as well.

Obama

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INFLUENTIAL SENATOR Speaking at the White House, Obama said Kerry understood the need to "harness all elements of American power", and said the veteran senator was "not going to need a lot of on-the-job training".

The president added that he was sure Kerry would be swiftly confirmed in the Senate.

Hillary Clinton, who is still recuperating from a stomach virus and concussion, was not present for the announcement. But Obama said she "could not be more excited" about Friday's announcement.

Kerry, 69, becomes Obama's first new cabinet nomination since he won a second term in November.

The president will also have to name a new defence secretary to replace Leon Panetta, and a new director of the CIA to take over from David Petraeus, who quit last month after admitting an affair.

BSF abducts Bangladeshi from border

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) abducted a Bangladeshi farmer while he was working at his paddy field near no-man's land at Doikhowa border in Lalmonirhat yesterday morning.

The farmer was identified as Baset Ali, 36, son of Nayon Uddin of Amjol village in of Hatibandha upazila.

Baset was planting boro seedlings in the field, 50 yards inside the Bangladesh territory, when a patrol team of BSF intruded and picked him up forcibly, said Doikhowa BGB camp Commander Subedar Ruhul Amin quoting locals.

Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) sent a protest letter to 21 BSF battalion at Morichabari camp in West Bengal and asked them to hand over Baset, he added.

On Tuesday, BSF men picked up another Bangladeshi farmer Shawkat Ali, 43, while he was working on his boro crop near no-man's land at the same border point.

Protesting the incident, BGB sent a letter to BSF asking them to return Shawkat.

BSF has not yet returned the Bangladeshi farmer, said Lt Col Mehedi Hasan, commanding officer of 31 BGB battalion in Lalmonirhat.

Factories set up

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Rajuk board member Sheikh Abdul Mannan.

The said areas came under the control of Rajuk since 1987 and definitively with the master plan since 1997.

Yet hundreds of various factories including around 500 readymade garment units have been set up there. Although mandatory, owners of these factories had neither obtained the land-use clearance nor the building approval from Rajuk, said Mannan.

The eight-storey building of Tazreen Fashions Ltd, which on November 24 experienced the worst factory fire in the country's history, was constructed on a narrow pathway in Nischintapur village without Rajuk's approval. The mandatory safety provisions as per the national building code and construction rules had been grossly violated there, said Mubasshar Hussein, president of Institute of Architects Bangladesh.

The dreadful fire in Tazreen killed 112 workers, primarily because there were no emergency or fire exits in the building. Besides, three staircases there end within the building on the ground floor where huge stacks of garment materials lay stored making any rush for the exit difficult.

The national building code requires a high-rise building like Tazreen to have safety compliances like emergency exits, fire-resistant doors, dedicated water reservoirs for fighting fire, easy

access for fire engines and alternative power supply, etc.

Tazreen factory lacks all of these, said Mubasshar. He blamed the sheer negligence of different government agencies concerned and lack of supervision for the tragedy.

Although Rajuk was responsible for controlling development in areas under the DMDD, it had shown utter apathy to its duties, added Mubasshar.

Rajuk Chairman Md Nurul Huda, however, attributed their failure in supervising development beyond the core city areas to lack of manpower."

Prof Sarwar Jahan, teacher of urban and regional planning at Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology, termed the Rajuk excuse unacceptable, saying that the eight-storey factory of Tazreen Fashions had been there for several years.

If Rajuk wanted, it could have assigned an official to visit the factories there at some point of time or could have outsourced a firm as a stopgap solution until it got the required manpower, said the professor. "Rajuk can't just sit on the manpower-shortage excuse and ignore its duty for years."

Prof Jahan observed that the industries set up flouting urban plan and regulatory laws would continue to put workers' lives at stake, as it did in Ashulia. The government has to ensure industrial set up at designated zones as

per the master plan with dedicated safety measures in place, he added.

Meanwhile, despite repeated attempts The Daily Star could not reach owner of Tazreen factory Delwar Hossain over the phone for his comments on compliance.

ROLE OF CHIEF FACTORY INSPECTOR

The office of Chief Inspector of Factory and Establishment is also responsible for ensuring workers' overall safety and welfare at factories as per the labour law.

Although the office issued licence to Tazreen factory, it failed to ensure workers' safety owing to no effective inspection.

Mohammad Obaidul Islam, a deputy chief inspector of factories, said they could not deliver due to manpower shortage.

He said nearly 40 percent posts of the 314-staff chief inspector's office had been lying vacant. They were supposed to have 103 inspectors but in reality they had only 52 to oversee more than 26,000 registered factories across the country.

There were only 13 inspectors out of the approved 29 to look after 14,000 registered factories in Dhaka division, he added.

In June 2010, the chief inspector's office placed a 2,271-member manpower organogram including 1,500 inspectors, but the government is yet to respond to the proposal.

Railway goes backward

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Electric), Cummins, Bombardier, Malaysia-Thailand Umbrella (MTU), Siemens and Caterpillar were urging the rail authorities to increase the RPM limit so that all companies could take part in the bidding.

They said the companies used to produce low RPM locomotives but gradually moved to higher RPM engines as they have more torque, power, besides being fuel efficient and environment friendly.

They said only General Motors produces low RPM locomotives. General Electric also produces some low RPM locomotive engines but it was switching to higher RPM ones.

The representatives of the companies also argued that restricting the RPM would only favour Korean Hyundai Rotem that has sold nine locomotives to the railway in 2010.

Hyundai Rotem brings parts of locomotives from the USA and assembles them in Korea. It would supply 11 more locomotives to Bangladesh in 2013.

"If the RPM limit is increased, the bidding will be competitive and ultimately the price would be low. If not, then only one company will be eligible and railway will have no way but to buy the locomotives at whatever price the company

quotes," said a representative of a company.

However, the railway has been arguing for the low RPM engines as they have a proven track record in the country.

"We have workshops and expert manpower to maintain the locomotives," said Bangladesh Railway Director General Md Abu Taher.

He claimed that the higher RPM engines were very light and not durable for railway. He did not agree that higher RPM engines would consume less fuel and be environment friendly. "It will increase maintenance cost," he added.

But many countries across the world now use higher RPM engines for faster rail services.

The companies said the railway could save \$1 million per locomotive if it buys higher RPM locomotives. It is cheaper because the locomotives are mass-produced.

"The pulling strength will increase with higher RPM engines. The low RPM locomotives can't pull if several extra coaches and wagons are added," claimed a company representative.

He said railway would not face any trouble as spare parts would come with the locomotives and railway people would be trained under the project. "Rather the railway would in near

future face problems if production of low RPM engines stops," he added.

The companies said whenever they push for changing the RPM limitations, railway officials bring in the Hungarian case as an excuse.

Railway had bought 80 diesel-hydraulic locomotives from Hungary in 1980-82 which became obsolete within a few years. The railway DG referring to that said the locomotives had become a liability for the railway.

But the reality is that the locomotives were diesel-hydraulic and of low quality. Railway knew about the locomotives but they had to buy them due to pressure from the then government.

The companies said their quality high RPM engines were not comparable with the Hungarian engines.

In the face of pressure from potential bidders, the railway authorities recently increased the RPM limit of engines in the tender specification to 900-1,100.

However, this increase has no meaning as Hyundai Rotem could only manufacture locomotives that have engines of 1,100 RPM.

The representatives of potential bidders claim that the railway has been giving excuses for 30 years just to buy locomotives from a single company.

Move to create

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are nominated by the party chief.

The AL insiders hinted that the 15-member presidium, the highest policymaking body of the party, might get expanded too along with the 3-member joint general secretaries, 32-member departmental secretaries and members.

AL presidium member Matia Chowdhury told The Daily Star that the expansion of the central committee became needful, as the country's population had sharply increased over the last couple of decades.

"As far as I know, more leaders will be included in the central committee subject to approval from the next national council," she said.

Matia, also the agriculture minister, said they were having problems in accommodating party leaders in different committees.

"For instance, the district committee has long been pressing us to expand the size of the upazila unit committees, as they could not include many dedicated leaders in those," she added.

AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif, however, said they were yet to decide on expanding the ALCWC.

Meanwhile, the ruling AL has formed several committees with a view to making the upcoming council a success.

AL presidium member and Deputy Leader of the House Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury has been made chief of the reception committee while presidium member Kazi Zafarullah head of the finance committee; presidium member and Communications Minister Obaidul Quader chairman of AL office/secretariat committee; lawmaker Asaduzzaman Noor head of the cultural committee; and AFM Bahauddin Nasim head of the disciplinary committee, among others.

Woman killed

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Sultana Roshni, 6, was on her way to Dhaka Central Jail to meet her husband Ripon, a BNP activist. Police detained him on December 10 from a procession in front of the BNP central office in Nayapaltan, said the victim's relatives.

Witnesses said around 7:30am, a container train from Chittagong passed through the level crossing towards Kamalapur Railway Station. The gates at the level crossing were closed.

Unwilling to wait to cross the level crossing, a car driver from Khilgaon pulled on a gate and moved forward. A CNG-run three-wheeler and the rickshaw followed the car.

Suddenly the Lalmonirhat-bound Lalmoni Express came from the opposite direction and hit the vehicles and the rickshaw.

Locals thronged the spot after the train left and found the woman lying dead on the road and the two children and the rickshaw puller groaning beside her.

The drivers of the private car and the auto-rickshaw escaped the scene, witness Milon Rahman, a hotel worker, told The Daily Star.

The car and rickshaw were badly damaged, while the auto-rickshaw was damaged partially in the accident.

Rifat and Roshni were admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital with head injuries and bruises on their bodies. Rickshaw puller Shahid Miah was undergoing treatment at the hospital for injuries to his head and legs.

Contacted, Transport Officer (Dhaka) of Railway Department AM Salahuddin said a five-member committee led by him was formed to investigate the incident.

Five railway men in three shifts a day carry out their duties to keep five gates closed at the level crossing when trains cross it, he added.

Trains pass through the level crossing over 120 times a day.

A case was filed, said railway sources, with Kamalapur Railway Police Station against the unidentified drivers of the car and the auto-rickshaw in connection with the accident.