

LABOUR RIGHTS, SAFETY

EU sees progress in Dhaka's efforts

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Acknowledging significant progress in areas of occupational safety and health and labour rights in RMG sector, the European Union has expressed its readiness to assist Bangladesh in the implementation of the programmes.

"We've seen significant progress ... but more must be done," said John Clancy, spokesperson of EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht, in a statement on Thursday on the occasion of one year of Rana Plaza tragedy.

He said the tragedy revealed serious shortcomings in the occupational safety and labour rights of Bangladesh

workers in the export-oriented ready-made garment industry. It had to be a turning point for safety and labour issues in Bangladesh.

The spokesperson said the EU, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the authorities of Bangladesh responded to the tragedy by launching an initiative known as the Sustainability Compact, joined by the US at a later stage.

The Sustainability Compact outlines concrete commitments, he said and added that the actions that stem from them lead to improved levels of occupational safety and health and promote responsible business conduct and greater

respect of labour rights, with a particular focus on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

"We've seen significant progress in these areas over past months but more must be done. Substantial progress on labour issues is important for Bangladesh's continued preferential access to the EU market," said the statement.

"The EU remains ready to assist Bangladesh with its reforms and monitors the implementation of the Sustainability Compact. We will have a fuller assessment of the Sustainability Compact's achievements on its first anniversary in July this year," it added.

Child murder charge mother in British court

AFP, London

A woman wept yesterday as she appeared in court charged with the murder of her three severely disabled children in Britain.

Tania Clarence, 42, broke down in tears as she looked over at her husband while she stood in the dock accused of killing her three-year-old twin sons Ben and Max and four-year-old daughter Olivia at their home.

All three children are said to have suffered from spinal muscular atrophy.

Her South African-born investment banker husband, Gary, 43, also wept as he looked eyes with his wife from his seat in the public gallery during the brief hearing.

His wife looked fragile as she stood in the glass-fronted dock, accused of the triple murder.

Her voice shaking with emotion, she spoke only to confirm her name, age and address.

3 killed

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said Md Jasim Uddin, officer-in-charge (OC) of Cox's Bazar Model Police Station.

Police also arrested five others, one bullet-hit, from the seized trawler.

The arrestees are: Sultan Ahmed, 28, of Moheshkhali, Abul Kashem, 29, of Islampur in Pahartali, Ali Zohar, 20, of Sabrang in Teknaf and Rahmatullah of Sabrang.

The bullet-hit, Md Hossain, of Samitipara in Cox's Bazar, is receiving treatment at Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital, hospital sources said.

During the raid, police did not find anything contraband in the trawler.

Lt Harun Ur Rashid, commander of Coast Guard's Teknaf Station, said the injured Coast Guard officials, Foisal Mahmud and Abdus Samad, were taken to Combined Military Hospital, Chittagong.

The OC of Cox's Bazar Model Police Station said, Shawkat Hossain had rented out his trawler to Nurul Amin Majhi for Tk 35,000 a month.

"We are quizzing the arrestees," he added.

Iranians deliver Rohani's first political defeat

AFP, Tehran

Eight months after taking office, Iranian President Hassan Rohani has suffered his first major political defeat, with the public overwhelmingly brushing aside appeals to forgo direct government aid.

The 455,000-rial (\$14) monthly handout scheme, initiated in December 2010 by Rohani's predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is part of broader economic reforms aimed at overhauling the country's massive subsidy system.

The reform -- which phases out parts of remaining subsidies on energy, utility bills and basic food costs -- is forecast in this year's budget

to save the cash-starved government \$18 billion.

Encouraged by economists as a way of regulating Iran's economy, which is stretched thin with debilitating sanctions and mismanagement, the second phase of the plan started Friday with petrol prices being raised as much as 75 percent.

The bid to curb expenditure under the separate handout scheme, however, appears to have failed.

The Rohani administration for weeks ran an aggressive media campaign seeking to persuade the most affluent of Iran's 77-million population, and some of the middle class, to waive the cash payments.

Free RMG unions

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US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, issued the statement in the early hours yesterday regarding the first anniversary of the Rana Plaza tragedy.

"The BGMEA and Bangladesh government must understand this simple message: Western consumers will not buy clothes that are stained with the blood of Bangladesh's workers," he said.

Without the strong voice of an independent factory union, workers have no mechanism to ensure their own safety, Menendez said.

"They [workers] cannot make sure that managers keep fire doors shut and stairwells clear, or that cracks in columns and walls are not simply painted over."

He observed that the Bangladesh government, while making progress in the registration of new unions, still lacks the institutional capacity and political will to protect them.

"This has had a chilling effect on labour organising in the country. Many workers now fear losing their jobs if they join a union and union organisers rightly fear for their own safety."

One year ago this week, the world's conscience was shocked by the deaths of over 1,130 garment workers when Rana Plaza, the building which housed their factories, collapsed on top of

them.

"For many, the tragedy was a call to action. The US government has suspended trade benefits for Bangladesh until it takes several concrete steps to improve workers' rights and safety," he said.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has initiated its largest-ever safe factories programme in Bangladesh and coordinated safety inspections, as well as compensation for the victims of Rana Plaza.

International retailers have taken important initial steps to address building and worker safety in Bangladesh.

"Yet, for others involved in Bangladesh's garment industry, the past year has been business as usual. Many factory owners in Bangladesh have suppressed the formation of unions in their factories by firing union leaders.

"According to reports, some factory managers have been involved in vicious attacks on union organisers," said the US senator.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) continues to represent the old guard of factory owners and has been reluctant to take any action against its members who

Scrap test of imported newsprint

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Bangladesh Pustak Prokashok O Bikreta Samity, Bangladesh Mudran Shilpo Samity and Pathyapustak Mudrak O Biponon Samity follows a directive of Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) issued on April 16 making the test of imported newsprint mandatory.

The provision in import policy has been made secretly and lacks transparency, the organisations alleged. They also pointed the finger to "an influential quarter" for being behind the move that will "jeopardise

the print and publication industry".

The statement says the provision incorporated in the import policy is 'unnecessary' and it may give rise to a local syndicate which will fix the price of newsprints arbitrarily.

Besides, the process of having imported newsprints checked by the BSTI is going to be time-consuming.

"It is likely to take a month or more in bringing samples of the newsprints to be imported for the BSTI test in Dhaka from Chittagong port, and then sending the report back to the port," says the statement, adding that the

lengthy process will inflict a huge loss on the importers.

The organisations also demanded the prices of locally produced papers used for educational purposes be decreased.

"We, the leaders of associations and organisations involved in printing, import, publication and sales business, believe that the government, particularly the commerce and industries ministries, will not step into the trap of a vested quarter," the statement concludes.

Years abroad for fortune

FROM PAGE 16

"I led an extremely miserable life and did many kinds of work. But I could not save any money," Ramiz told The Daily Star at the airport.

He first went to India and then to Afghanistan. He entered Pakistan and from there to Iran with the help of a Pakistani lorry driver. He did not carry any passport or any other legal document.

He kept contact with his family in Golapganj of Sylhet till 1994, and then suddenly stopped calling home.

"For more than 15 years, I worked in a factory as a water supplier in Tehran, but my employer did not give my wages regularly. He often threatened to hand me over to the police," he said.

He wanted to come home after around 10 years of his entry to Iran but he did not, knowing his parents were dead.

"My father had a dream to go to

London. He sold out my grandfather's property to materialise his dream. But he could not go to London," Najim Uddin, the youngest son of Ramiz, told The Daily Star over the phone from Sylhet.

Najim, 40, said as they were in the dark about his father's condition, his elder brother Sharif Uddin went to Iran in 1989 to see it for himself.

"He [Sharif] met my father and spent four and a half years with him. After that, we did not hear from either of them."

Ramiz said Sharif went to Dubai in 1994 for a better luck. "I don't know where he is now."

None in the family knows it either.

Like Ramiz, Kamar Uddin, 55, did not see his family for the past 23 years. He, too, went to Iran illegally, via India and Pakistan in 1990. He wanted to come back earlier, but did not dare making any attempt fearing arrest.

"My wife and my son repeatedly asked me to come home. But I did not have my passport to return," he said.

He said he used to fish in the Arabian Sea for a fish trader, Kamar, however, sent money to his family through some other Bangladeshis living in Iran.

Over the past two months, Iran police rescued at least 80 Bangladeshis, including the nine who returned yesterday.

The seven other returnees are Halim, Mohsin, Sohrab, Shahabuddin, Tamijuddin, Zillur Rahman and Rhidoy.

Some of them were trafficked from the UAE and Oman to Iran, with promises of lucrative jobs in European countries.

Twelve of the 80 returned home in the first phase on April 17. Another 21 will arrive on April 30, said Binoy Krishna Mallick, executive director of

UN rights chief heads to S Sudan after massacres

AFP, Geneva

UN human rights chief Navi Pillay is heading to conflict-torn South Sudan after a wave of mass killings of civilians, her office said yesterday.

"In the wake of the recent killings in Bentiu and Bor in South Sudan, the high commissioner is leaving for Juba," spokeswoman Cecil Pouilly told reporters, adding that Pillay would arrive Monday.

Pillay will carry out a joint mission with Adama Dieng, the UN's special envoy for the prevention of genocide.

Pouilly said Pillay and Dieng were being sent to South Sudan by UN chief Ban Ki-moon, as the world body steps up efforts to stem the conflict in the world's newest country.

The UN Security Council on Thursday brandished the threat of sanctions against South Sudan government forces and rebels responsible for escalating abuses.

Both sides have been implicated in atrocities and war crimes.

Last week, the rebels were blamed for the killings of hundreds of people in the oil hub of Bentiu, and a pro-government mob killed dozens of civilians in an attack on a UN base in Bor where they were sheltering.

The government of President Salva Kiir has been locked in battle for four months with rebels loyal to sacked vice president Riek Machar.

The war has left thousands and possibly tens of thousands of people dead, and forced over one million to flee their homes, sparking a massive humanitarian crisis.

They don't need

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tube-wells for irrigation have cultivated maize and other crops on the char land.

But a lack of water in the river has made their life difficult as the underground water level is falling sharply, they said, adding that Teesta water is crucial for agriculture.

Farhan Uddin Ahmed Pasha, convener of Teesta Putro, a local platform to save the river, said AL leaders don't know the pain of people, so they stood against realising Teesta water share.

Remove illegal

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Bapa General Secretary Abdul Matin said the decision to open the ground to public attests to the fact that Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club was wrong in barring people from entering into the ground.

Amid protests by 50 green organisations and residents of Dhanmondi, the DSCC opened the field to public on Thursday.

The club sued four green activists and 200 unnamed others on April 18, hours after a group of protesters entered the playground ignoring the illegal embargo on commoners.

The accused in the case are former president of Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB) Mobassher Hossain, Bapa leader Iqbal Habib, architect Salma A Shafi and Kamrunnabar Dana, general secretary of Bangladesh Women's Sports Association.

The High Court on March 15, 2011 had directed the then Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakha to remove all illegal structures from the field within 15 days.

Since then, half a dozen government bodies, including the city corporation and public works department, favoured the occupation of the playground by the private club named after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's slain brother.

Taking full advantage of the support, the club tightened its grip on the ground and started using it as an exclusive private property, with the club's security guards barring people from entering into the field.

Club president Manjur Kader, during a meeting at the playground on April 19, audaciously announced that the field is only for the "elites" and not for any "street urchins".

AL leader's

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Safatullah of Jamilapur village.

Abdur Rafe Khandakar, general secretary of the upazila unit AL, alleged that some Jamaat-Shibir men attacked Mozaffar while he was going to his village mosque to offer his Fajr prayers.

They cut off two fingers of his left hand and tendons in his right hand with sharp weapons, leaving him critically injured, Rafe added.

Mozaffar was rushed to Ghoraghat Upazila Health Complex. But doctors referred him to Bogra Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital as his condition was deteriorating.

Golam Mostafa, ameer of Ghoraghat municipality unit Jamaat-e-Islami, denied allegations of involvement of Jamaat-Shibir men in the attack.

Forhat Imrul Kayes, officer-in-charge of Choraghat Police Station, confirmed the incident.

Jamaat preparing

FROM PAGE 1

Dinajpur district. Top Jamaat leaders in the district are monitoring the activities of those committees. Dodging the law enforcers, Jamaat-Shibir men are holding gatherings in the name of milad and doa mahfil, seerat mahfil and study circles to prepare their activists for the protests. The Jamaat plans to stage protests in lesser-known places in the districts to avoid police action.

It has also launched a massive campaign in remote villages to drum up support for Sayedee. Party activists are playing his sermons in audio cassettes and showing videos.

Jamaat policymakers have already instructed its grassroots to get reunited and launch violent protests if the Supreme Court upheld the death penalty awarded earlier to Sayedee by the International Crimes Tribunal-1 for crimes against humanity during the Liberation War in 1971.

Earlier on February 28 last year, Jamaat-Shibir men had unleashed mayhem in Satkhira, Bogra, Gaibandha, Thakurgaon and several other districts protesting the death penalty awarded to Sayedee by the tribunal.

At least 33 people, including four policemen, were killed on that single day as Jamaat-Shibir men ran riot in 15 districts.

INSECURITY HAUNTS HINDUS

Though the police in Jamaat strongholds have assured people of taking measures to foil any subversive activities by Jamaat-Shibir men, locals, especially the Hindus, are passing days in anxiety.

Talking to this newspaper, coordinator of Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal's Satkhira district unit Azad Hossain said they fear that Jamaat-Shibir men might create anarchy in the district again after the SC verdict in the war crimes case against Sayedee.

Police superintendent of Satkhira Chowdhury Monzurul Kabir said they have been on highest alert to avoid any probable subversive activities. The law enforcers have taken special measures in sensitive areas to this end, he added.

A key component of the BNP-led opposition alliance, the Jamaat was very active during the movement against the Awami League-led alliance government ahead of the one-sided parliamentary polls on January 5.

The SC could any day set a date for delivering the verdict on the appeals in the war crimes case against Sayedee.

Open to post-polls coalition

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decline of regional parties and Congress needed for BJP and its allies to reach close to majority is not supported by ground realities.

A sub-par NDA performance could mean, Congress strategists reckon, that the ruling party remains in the 100-120 seat range that gives it a range of strategic options to bring together a non-BJP coalition.

"If Congress gets around 140 seats, it can consider heading a coalition as was the case in 2004. But the party is flexible about leadership, making it a better option for regional allies than Modi," said party sources.

Responding to queries on his candidacy for PM, Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi has said he is not fixated on holding office, a position that does not rule him out for the top job, but allows him to pick his spot in the batting order.

Interestingly, ahead of the first phase of polling on April 6, defence minister A K Antony had suggested that the Left should introspect its ideologies and consider being part of a UPA-III to keep BJP out of office.

"After the elections, several parties which are not ready to join hands with Congress will have to rethink to avoid the danger of bringing BJP to power," Antony had said, though he later said Congress will not support a third front.

Internet a CIA project: Putin

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of his revelations has been to undermine the global nature of the web as well as playing into the hands of dictators. His supporters counter that it is the NSA rather than Snowden that has damaged trust in the service.

During a recent national televised question and answer session, Putin batted away a question from Snowden - who won temporary asylum in Russia after having his US passport revoked - about whether Russia also intercepted and stored communications harvested from the internet, as the US did. "I hope we don't do that," he said to applause from the studio audience. "We don't have as much money as they do in the US."

Putin acknowledged that there was surveillance of criminals and potential terrorists but denied there was mass surveillance of citizens.

A purely Russian-run system could make it easier for the Russian intelligence services to monitor and control traffic. The Kremlin already has powerful tools in place for this, but nonetheless the internet offers a platform for Russian opposition groups denied a voice on the country's television and radio. At the same media conference, Putin also referred directly to the most popular search engine in Russia, Yandex - a reference that caused its shares to plummet.

Besides, the ICT-1 kept pending the verdict in the war crimes case against Nizami. The trial in the case completed on March 24.

The High Court on August 1 last year declared illegal the Jamaat-e-Islami's registration as a political party with the Election Commission.

Later, Jamaat moved the SC challenging the HC verdict. The appeal is pending with the SC.

The investigation agency of the ICT-1 on March 26 submitted its probe report to the prosecution on Jamaat's involvement in war crimes during the Liberation War in 1971. It suggested banning Jamaat and six other organisations that were associated with the party in 1971.

(Our correspondents in Chittagong, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, Thakurgaon, Chapainawabganj, Bagerhat, Bogra, Dinajpur, Pirojpur and Satkhira contributed to this report.)

City's wait

FROM PAGE 1

the city might see a small drop in temperature.

The Met office said some parts of the country, including Dhaka, Comilla, Barisal, Sylhet, Faridpur and Madaripur, cooled down a little since 3:00pm yesterday.

People of Bhola, Narayanganj, Comilla and Moulvibazar experienced light rain yesterday, bringing much-needed relief from the heat wave sweeping across the country.

According to the Met office, 2mm rainfall was recorded in Bhola but they could not record rainfall in Narayanganj and Moulvibazar as they did not have equipment there.

Meanwhile, rail communication between several northern districts was disrupted for an hour as rails buckled in Parbatipur of Dinajpur due to the extreme heat.

Railway officials said locals and railway employees first noticed that around 100 metres of tracks got bent in places between Rangpur and Dinajpur around noon.

The highest temperature recorded in Chuadanga yesterday was 41.9 degrees Celsius.

Fed up with the prolonged dry spell, villagers of Bhatpara in Gaibandha got frogs "married" in a unique custom seeking rain from the deity. The frogs were put in tiny clothes and people in colourful attires attended the wedding.

"Our predecessors used to do this and we did it for rain," said Nilufer Tinni, an organisers of the event.

But tactical denials apart, the idea of a "secular front" to keep Modi at bay has hardly died out and is, in fact, being seen as the best option to prevent an NDA government.

Congress's pitch to regional bosses would be that they would get much more elbow room in a government facilitated by the party than one run by Modi who is unlikely to allow allies a free hand that they might seek.

Arguing that not formally projecting Rahul as PM was a wise move, Congress strategists feel BJP will not find it so expedient to hunt for a more "compatible" face having played up Modi's OBC credentials.

Though not all non-NDA parties can pull along as Samajwadi Party and BSP or DMK and AIADMK are mutually incompatible, but a cluster of 200-odd non-NDA, non-UPA MPs is large enough to stitch together a coalition, feel Congress leaders.

The issue at hand, as far as Congress is concerned, is whether BJP can actually achieve the tallies that some opinion polls have indicated and the party feels the targets are not easily gettable.

In Congress's assessment, BJP crossing the 220 seat mark on its own and the NDA getting to 250 requires a serious meltdown of regional parties like SP, BSP, AIADMK, BJD, NCP and others that does not seem likely.

Putin's St Petersburg comments could herald the most serious challenge yet to the world wide web, which was founded by the British computer scientist Sir Tim Berners-Lee.

Putin claimed the "CIA project" was still developing and that Russia needed to be protected from it. The nation had a duty to resist that influence and fight for its interests online, he said.

His remarks come in the wake of a law passed by the Russian parliament this week requiring foreign social media websites to keep their servers in Russia. The law also requires them to save all information about their users for at least six months.

Business executives close to Putin now control Russia's leading social network, VKontakte.

Putin, in referring to Yandex, criticised the company for its registration in the Netherlands, "not only for tax reasons but for other considerations too". He was responding to a questioner who complained that Yandex was storing information on servers abroad, potentially compromising Russian security.

Snowden has previously faced criticism from within America for accepting asylum in Russia but failing to speak out against the authoritarian nature of the regime. After addressing Putin last week, he was accused of putting a softball question to him.