

Focus on economy, security

Top ex-diplomats of India, Bangladesh urge two countries

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A galaxy of former Bangladeshi and Indian diplomats yesterday called on their governments to strengthen economic engagement and intensify security cooperation between the two countries for the mutual benefit of the people.

The call was made by over a dozen former high commissioners, who served in Dhaka and New Delhi, on the concluding day of the two-day first ever Bangladesh-India High Commissioners' Summit.

Organised by the international relations department of Dhaka University with support from the India-Bangladesh Foundation, the meeting of retired diplomats adopted a nine-point Dhaka Declaration.

The declaration, which chartered the future course of bilateral relations, was made public by Prof Imtiaz Ahmed of the DU's international relations department at a press conference following a closed-door meeting of the envoys at the Senate Hall of the university in the afternoon.

It stated that the two countries

should strengthen their friendly relations on the basis of mutual trust, amity and cooperation in the best interests of the people of Bangladesh and India by protecting their democratic values and rights.

The summit called for an endeavour to ensure equal, equitable, inclusive and sustainable growth based on social justice and respect.

It stressed the need for intensifying efforts to strengthen bilateral ties by taking a holistic approach towards addressing unresolved issues and challenges.

The former envoys also urged the governments to recognise the importance of deeper and effective communications at the popular level through greater and comprehensive flow of information and contacts between students, academicians, print and electronic media, corporate sector, environmentalists and other stakeholders to build enhanced level of awareness, mutual trust and confidence.

The declaration underscored free

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Elephants are sometimes seen on the roads of the country but the people of Bogra town yesterday were treated with something special. An elephant and her calf walking the streets near the Govt Girls School. PHOTO: STAR

MAHJABIN DEATH 'Phone call details may hold clues'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police have asked for the call detail record of the cell phone conversation between Shamarukh Mahjabin and her father to check if there are any clues about her death.

Nurul Islam, Mahjabin's father, claimed his daughter had called him over the cell phone around Wednesday noon and asked him to rescue her during their 30-minute-long conversation.

"Father, take me away. Otherwise, they will kill me," Nurul quoted his daughter as saying.

On the day, he also talked to Mahjabin's husband Humayun Sultan around midnight but he did not give any hint about his earlier conversation with his daughter, Nurul, an assistant PDB engineer in Jessore, said.

Shamarukh Mahjabin, 26, was found dead at her in-laws house in Dhanmondi on Thursday. She was the wife of Humayun Sultan, son of Khan Tipu Sultan, ex-MP from Jessore-5 constituency. They got married in April last year.

Abu Bakar Siddique, officer-in-charge of Dhanmondi Police Station, SEE PAGE 10 COL 4

We need vultures

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would become dry.

So, during the floods or rainy season, any cattle dying in the village would simply be left at this canal. Within hours, pariah dogs, jungle crows, mynas would join the foray of having a share of the carcass. Soon, jackals and vultures would also battle for a share of the free food.

The news of vultures swooping on the carcass would spread through the village like wildfire. We the youngsters of under 16 years of age would immediately gather, with sticks and pulled-down fresh branches of trees, and rush towards the carcass eating animals en masse. We attempted this many a time in our childhood but I don't recall we had ever hit a vulture although we were just a few centimetres away from them. I had seen king vultures approaching the carcass, first eating eyes and anal openings, which have soft tissues, thereby opening up the carcass. Soon vultures, dogs and jackals would fight for their share. When dogs used to be busy chasing away jackals, the vultures would eat up most of the carcass. Jackals were the last to get their share and that was usually after the sun had tilted much towards the horizon in the west.

I don't think I have seen a King Vulture after 1957, when I moved to Manikganj sub-divisional town to complete my SSC and HSC. However, Bengal Vultures were aplenty in areas under Dhamrai, Savar, Manikganj proper, Shingair, Ghior, Shivalaya and Sauria under Manikganj, Nagpur and Mirzapur police stations under Tangail. These are the places my relatives were spread over. I used to see vultures in all these areas at least until the Liberation War in 1971.

During early 1980s, before the area between Banani and Shahjalal International Airport had been developed, vultures used to roost on a few Palmyra palm trees that used to dot the side now taken over by the cantonment expansion and housing projects like Nikunja.

If anybody flies over the country with a low flying twin-seater or a helicopter, the tallest tree-like structures that he/she would encounter are mobile telephone towers, power pylons and high-rise buildings with telephone towers.

I understand that now there is no such wildy-growing roadside trees like Palmyra palm, *Debdaru*, *Shimul*, *Satim*, *Bot*, *Pakur-Ashuaththa*, *Pitali*, *Barun*, *Hijol*, *Gab* and *Keroch*, which anybody would use even as firewood. Such things were in plentiful supplies all over the country before. Soon after the independence, road constructions, brick kilns and tobacco curing by a multinational company, which enticed farmers to use trees for curing tobacco leaves, led to the dissemination of all abundantly growing, virtually ownerless tall and

soft wood trees. Because of the huge demand for timber and firewood, all tall and more than 20-year-old trees had been cut from private properties by their rightful owners. To join the competition of cutting down natural trees, the forest department started removing naturally-growing trees and replacing those with commercially viable indigenous as well as exotic tall trees in military fashion that excluded all tall and soft-wood trees from the government forestry areas.

Vultures for their survival need tall and soft branched trees for two obvious reasons that a very few countrymen know. First, for its heavy body to land on, the branches or leaves must be elastic so that when it drops down, it swings and allows the vulture to balance on such a high place with ease.

Secondly, for nest-building they need trees with pliable branches for obvious reason of accommodating the huge pile of nesting materials and then breaking smaller branches and twigs with ease to build the nest.

When all tall trees disappeared from the private properties and forests, as a stopgap arrangement, vultures started using *Taal* and *Narikel* (Palmyra and Coconut Palm trees) leaves for landing. But the vultures did not find tall trees to build nests on.

In addition, people started treating cattle with painkillers like diclofenac, which impacted the vultures heavily when they ate the carcasses, as has been found by scientists in India and Pakistan where more than 80 percent vultures died from this.

Moreover, our countrymen have become smarter. They are using the dying cattle for human consumption. Some even reported to have used meat from dead cows for human consumption.

Also they dispose of the cattle carcasses in a more hygienic way now than they used to 20-30 years ago.

So, vultures are deprived of whole carcasses.

Ultimately, most vultures disappeared from the country. My educated guess is that in the whole country we possibly have less than 200 vultures including 50 or so that pass over the country as migrants, especially the *Kalo Shakun Black* or *Cinereous Vulture* and *Himalayan/Eurasian Griffon*.

In addition to natural and man-made causes for the vulture disappearance, our culture is also not very kind to most animals.

Socially, an animal Haram or forbidden by religion can be killed. Some animals are halal, meaning they are allowed to be eaten. In this case too we kill animals. Thus, in both counts animals are killed. Sometimes our poets, litterateurs, etc, unknowingly or due to lack of knowledge regarding our nature blame poor wild animals. They have introduced Bangla words and phrases that demonise vultures, like *shakuner*

haiyat (having a very long life), *shakuni* (a bad woman or a witch). So, socially we have been taught to hate vultures.

In nature or in the traditional ecosystems, vultures play a unique role of a janitor or a cleaner. When cattle die in a village or countryside, or a wild deer, a gaur in forests, we as human beings do not dispose of such carcasses hygienically. We just dump them a little away from our home or village without realising the harm such dead bodies may cause to us.

WE NEED VULTURES, THEY DON'T NEED US

The Parsis in Bombay, now Mumbai, had a huge tower to dispose of human bodies so that vultures could feed on those. With the loss of more than 80 percent of India's vultures, Parsis are in trouble with regards to disposing of their dead compatriots.

On a three-day tour of Tanguar haor in 2012, I came across four dead cattle being carried to various parts of rivers from Taherpur township to the middle of the haor and there were no vultures to eat those. The area was filled with the stench of rotting carcasses. No vultures in sight that meant that nature's janitors were not in action.

So we need vultures to clean our environment.

A few mini colonies of vultures that have been spotted by the Bangladesh IUCN Chapter's vulture research team should be protected at all costs.

In this the forest department must play these key roles. 1) Save all tall non-timber forest trees and other tall trees used by vultures for either roosting or nesting.

2) Start a vulture café near vulture breeding colonies by slaughtering diclofenac free cattle, cutting those into large chunks and spreading in designated "Vulture Canteen" -- a protected open field where vultures would be allowed to eat under human protection free of pariah dogs, jackals and crows.

3) Start a vulture breeding and reintroduction programme in collaboration with Bombay Natural History Society, which is managing such canteens and breeding centres in several parts of India and releasing adult captive-bred vultures back to nature.

4) Launch an awareness programme so that people become tolerant to vultures in their neighbourhoods.

5) All private properties housing natural populations of vultures are to be compensated for the loss or the damage to the trees and properties caused by vultures, such as nest building, damaging tree leaves with droppings or by landing on them. This can be done with a special protocol to be developed under Bangladesh Wildlife Protection/Preservation Act.

Poor's income not tax-free?

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profits in advance income tax.

Already hit by falling interests on deposits and high inflation, poor savers like Ferdousi are made to pay advance income tax by the National Board of Revenue (NBR) while tax avoidance by the rich is rife.

Ibrahim Khaled, former deputy governor of Bangladesh Bank, questioned the justification for realising taxes from people whose income is below the tax-free ceiling of Tk 2.20 lakh.

"This is advance income tax. So, there is no scope for adjusting this tax," he told The Daily Star.

He suggested that the government could refrain from imposing any tax on profits from a deposit up to Tk 5 lakh.

"Social security system does not exist in Bangladesh. This tax-free threshold can provide some relief to the old, retired, and physically and mentally-challenged people," Khaled said.

Several bank officials said the government will not lose much revenue if it sets a threshold, as only around 10 percent of the total deposits in the banking system belongs to this group.

The NBR collected Tk 2,870 crore in advance income tax from these bank

accounts in fiscal 2012-13, and collections from poor savers would be below Tk 100 crore.

Moreover, banks are cutting interest rates on savings due to weak investment demand, dealing a further blow to small savers.

Interest rates on most savings schemes are below 11 percent while those were above 13 percent a year ago. Excess liquidity in the banking system is to blame for that.

At the end of May, excess liquidity in banks stood around Tk 140,243 crore, according to the central bank.

Requesting anonymity, an official at the Satkhira branch of Agrani Bank said many clients expressed frustration after learning about the bank's circular issued in May.

Nazma Khatun, who lives off begging, said she deposited Tk 1 lakh with the bank branch for future benefits of her only son.

"I am a physically-challenged poor woman. I live on alms. It was very tough for me to save the money," she said.

The Agrani bank official said demand for loans was very low as the banking system sat on excess liquidity. To reduce its losses, Agrani Bank was using various excuses to close its savings schemes with high interest rates.

Another such victim is Rowshan Ara Begum, who works at a government agency in the capital.

As her six-year scheme matured early this year, she went to the bank to withdraw the money. The bank deducted 15 percent tax on the profits from her savings as the mother of two, whose income is tax-free, didn't have a TIN.

Bankers said many customers were dissatisfied over the issue and the banks had conveyed it to Bangladesh Bank.

When the NBR introduced the policy, the banks requested the central bank to reconsider the decision, as many depositors don't have TIN certificates.

Asked, former NBR Member Syed Aminul Karim said all depositors pay advance income tax but many of them don't submit their income tax returns to the NBR. "The rules aim to motivate them to be tax compliant voluntarily."

Aminul said most of those who make fixed deposits are rich and able to pay tax. "The depositors will get refunds if they pay more taxes than they are required to."

He, however, admitted that there should be a threshold for those who save money in the DPS.

Youngest ever computer specialist

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Birmingham City University to become a Microsoft Certified Professional.

In doing so he has set a new world record for the youngest person ever to pass a Microsoft exam - at the age of five years and 11 months, beating the previous record held by six-year-old Mehroz Yawar from Pakistan.

Ayan was first introduced to computers when he was just three, by his father Asim, 43, who soon realised his son's natural aptitude for technology.

The IT consultant then built his son a computer lab at the family's

home in Coventry, West Midlands and started preparing Ayan for the complex Microsoft test.

After just five months training, Ayan sat the 'Supporting Windows 8.1' assessment for IT professionals alongside several adult candidates, even though at five he will not be able to work for another eight years.

Ayan breezed through the two hour exam in September and even finished with time to spare before finding out shortly afterwards he had passed.

The test is normally taken just before or after university by young adults aiming to be information technology technicians.

Sections of the assessment included multiple choice, fill in the blanks, drag and drop, and several scenario based questions.

The computer based outline test examined the applicants' knowledge of hardware, software, and their understanding of how Windows works.

According to employment laws, the youngest age a child can work part-time is 13, except children involved in areas such as acting and modelling, who can work as long as they have a performance licence.

Children over 13 can work for 12 hours a week in term time, and 25 during school holidays.

Obama warns

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ministers in February to boost global growth by 2% in five years.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon also urged those attending to meet the challenges posed by Ebola, climate change and the conflict in Ukraine.

Meeting on the margins of the summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin urged his French counterpart Francois Hollande to join him to defuse tensions between the two countries over Ukraine.

France has withheld the delivery of two warships to the Russian navy over its actions in Ukraine.

The Russian president also discussed "rebuilding relations" with the UK after a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister David Cameron, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Before the summit began, Cameron said Russia could face further sanctions unless it stopped "destabilising Ukraine".

But Putin faced a frosty reception from Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper over Russia's military assertiveness in Ukraine.

"I'll shake your hand, but I only

have one thing to say to you: you need to get out of Ukraine," Harper told the Russian leader.

Earlier President Obama said Russia's "aggression" towards Ukraine was a "threat to the world".

President Obama did not mention China explicitly but he warned of the dangers posed by territorial disputes in the South China Sea, where Beijing's actions have raised concern among its neighbours.

He also said that all countries had to increase prosperity, warning that America could not "carry the global economy on its back".

Opening the summit, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said he wanted to use the event to reassure people about the direction of the world's economy, with a "message of hope and optimism".

He said job creation, identifying tax cheats and strengthening the global economy would all be discussed.

His government had tried to keep climate change off the agenda, despite calls from campaigners.

However, Obama yesterday said a Sino-US breakthrough in Beijing this

week on reducing carbon emissions proves that a post-Kyoto deal to arrest climate change is achievable, as he unveiled a \$3 billion pledge to a UN-backed climate mitigation fund.

More than 200 protesters buried their heads in the sands of Bondi Beach on Thursday in a demonstration over climate change inaction.

The Australian government is facing criticism over its climate policies. Since coming to power, Abbott has axed a carbon tax and overseen a 70% fall in investment in renewable energy.

In other developments, G20 leaders released a statement in which they vowed to do all they could to "extinguish" the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

It said that members state were committed to do what was necessary "to ensure the international effort can extinguish the outbreak and address its medium-term economic and humanitarian costs".

The summit is taking place amid tight security, with some 6,000 police deployed. Twenty-seven different groups have been given permits to protest at designated areas.

Like immature boy Joy talks

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Sammilita Peshajibi Parishad, a platform of pro-BNP-Jamaat professionals, organised the programme to mark the "National Revolution and Solidarity Day".

"I personally don't want to say anything about you [Joy] as you are very junior to me. I just want to tell you to please stop speaking like an immature boy," Fakhru said.

Addressing a seminar in a city hotel on Friday, Joy, also the ICT adviser to PM Sheikh Hasina, termed BNP a party of razzakars, and said the name of Ziaur Rahman, founder of the BNP, should be excluded from the freedom fighters' list.

Reacting sharply, Fakhru said it was Zia for whom the rebirth of the Awami League was possible.

"Please speak on an issue after gathering detailed knowledge about it.

Otherwise, people won't like you as a leader of the younger generation," he said.

Mentioning that former minister Abdul Latif Siddiqui had said Joy as the PM's ICT adviser gets "2 lakh dollar per month", the BNP leader added that people now wanted to know whether Latif had lost his job for his comments against Joy or for hurting people's religious sentiments.