

Hamid flies

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expected to ratify the long-pending Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) soon to take the bilateral relations to a newer height.

A special flight of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, carrying the President and his wife, Rashida Khanom, will depart the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport at 10:45am, President's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim said yesterday.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahrar Alam will accompany the President during the tour.

Quoting a statement issued yesterday by Indian Ministry of External Affairs, our New Delhi correspondent reports: "The visit of the Bangladesh President will contribute to further strengthening and expanding the close bilateral relations between our two countries."

During the visit, the Bangladesh President will have a meeting with his Indian counterpart at the Rashtrapati Bhavan on Friday. Later, he will join dinner there to be hosted by the Indian President.

Abdul Hamid will also have a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Vice President of India Hamid Ansari, Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Opposition Leader of Rajya Sabha Ghulam Nabi Azad will separately meet President Hamid during the tour.

The President will stay at Rashtrapati Bhavan during his stay in New Delhi.

Abdul Hamid will also visit historical and culturally important places like Agra, Jaipur and Kolkata.

Our New Delhi correspondent adds that Abdul Hamid will visit the Taj Mahal on December 20 and Ajmer the next day. On December 22, he will fly to Kolkata where West Bengal state Governor K N Tripathi will host a dinner for him on that day.

The President will travel to Bolpur by a helicopter on December 23 to lay the foundation stone of Bangladesh Bhavan in Visva Bharati University before returning to Kolkata and then to Dhaka on the same day.

European

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Meanwhile, Luxembourg's parliament voted yesterday to urge the government to recognise a Palestinian state - the latest in a series of similar moves around Europe aimed at pressuring Israel to move forward the peace process.

The motion, filed by the socialist head of parliament's foreign affairs committee, called on Prime Minister Xavier Bettel's government to "formally recognise a Palestinian state under the 1967 frontiers, and solely modified in accord with both parties".

The socialist, greens and radical left groups in the European Parliament had wanted an outright call for the recognition of Palestinian statehood.

But the centre-right European People's Party of European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker, the leading group in parliament, forced them into a compromise motion linking it to peace talks.

"There is no immediate unconditional recognition (of statehood)," EPP chief Manfred Weber said.

But his socialist counterpart Gianni Pittella insisted it was a "historic decision" and a "victory for the whole parliament".

Several European parliaments have passed motions urging their governments to recognise a Palestinian state in recent weeks in a bid to pressure Israel to relaunch the moribund peace process.

France, Britain, Spain, Ireland and Portugal have all passed votes to that end.

Sweden has gone even further, officially recognising Palestine as a state.



Adivasis of Suridaspara in Naniarchar upazila of Rangamati form a human chain yesterday protesting the Bangalee settlers' attack on them.

PHOTO: STAR

Reeling from shock

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the Rangamati-Khagrachhari road and burned down several houses and shops of the indigenous people.

They also vandalised Karuna Bihar Buddhist Temple and took away seven bronze idols, the victims alleged.

The police believe the attack was in retaliation for the destruction of around 4.5 lakh pineapple and 20,000 teak saplings, planted by Bangalee settlers, on Monday night. The settlers blamed this on the indigenous communities.

The indigenous people, however, claimed the settlers had planted the

saplings on the land belonging to them.

The local administration yesterday confirmed that 54 houses and seven shops had been torched during the attack.

However, they could not ascertain how many houses had been vandalised and looted and the financial estimate of the damage.

A sub-committee will estimate the loss, said Naniarchar Upazila Parishad Chairman Shaktiman Chakma, who has been made the chief of the 12-member committee formed following the incident.

Meanwhile, the indigenous commu-

nities formed human chains at different points of Rangamati-Khagrachhari road between 10:00am and 12:30pm, demanding immediate arrest of the attackers.

They also asked for compensation for the victims, recovery of the allegedly looted idols and an end to the grabbing of their land.

Activists of the United People's Democratic Front blocked the Rangamati-Khagrachhari road for several hours.

Members of the Rangamati district unit of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS-Santu Larma

faction) also marched in procession and held a rally in front of the deputy commissioner's office.

At the rally, they alleged that communal attacks were being carried out on the indigenous people with a view to driving them out of the country.

Meanwhile, rights body Ain o Salish Kendra in a statement yesterday condemned the attack and demanded an investigation.

Parbatya Chattagram Pahari Chhatra Parishad and Hill Women's Federation staged a protest rally at the base of Raju Memorial Sculpture on Dhaka University campus yesterday.

WB okays \$1.1b loan

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"Directly and indirectly, these operations help ensure that even the poorest children in Bangladesh can achieve their full potential," Zutt added.

The ISPP will benefit 10 percent of the extremely poor population, or 27 lakh people in 42 of the poorest upazilas in the country, the WB statement says.

The project will provide income support to about 6 lakh poorest mothers in exchange for participating in activities aimed at improving their children's nutrition and cognitive development, it adds.

Monthly cash transfers will be electronically disbursed into these mothers' post office accounts using smart cash cards to help minimise scope for errors in the transfer process.

"Ensuring adequate nutrition prenatally and in the first two years of life helps to maximise a child's brain development and health," said Ifath Sharif, WB task team leader, ISPP.

"Helping a child's growth and cognitive development in the initial five years is critical to boost the earnings capacity in the later years of life and to prevent the transmission of poverty across generations," Ifath Sharif added.

The project will also focus on strengthening local governments' delivery of safety net programmes.

The additional financing for the ongoing PEDP3 would continue to improve the primary education sector by increasing net enrolment to 98 percent and the primary completion rate to 80 percent, the global lender believes.

The project would also continue

efforts to ensure merit-based teacher recruitment and fill in vacant school positions. Moreover, it will ensure textbook delivery to 90 percent of the schools within the first month of the school year.

"The additional financing for the Government-led programme will contribute to bring 19 million Bangladeshi primary school age children to school, provide them quality learning, and ensure they complete the primary school cycle," said Ayesha Vawda, WB task team leader for the PEDP3.

In addition, the programme would continue the introduction of pre-primary education, especially in disadvantaged areas, and enhance quality of the school facilities and infrastructure.

The MDSP aims to make the coastal population less vulnerable to natural

disasters. The project will construct 552 new multipurpose disaster shelters, improve 450 existing ones, and build connecting roads and communication networks for easy accessibility in nine coastal districts.

"The project will benefit 14 million people among the coastal population living in the front line of climate change," said Anna C O'Donnell, WB task team leader for the MDSP, adding that it would also introduce steel shelter designs for the first time in Bangladesh for improved construction quality and durability.

The credits are from the International Development Association (IDA), the World Bank's concessional lending arm, have 38 years to maturity with a 6-year grace period and carry a service charge of 0.75 percent.

Country gets first female combat pilots

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said a beaming Nayma after achieving the feat.

"I always had the dream to be a pilot. When I joined the BAF, I didn't get the opportunity to become a pilot. However, the chance eventually came. We are grateful to the Almighty Allah and the BAF authorities and my senior officers and instructors who trained us and helped us fulfil our dream," Nayma told The Daily Star at the base.

She dedicated her success to the women in Bangladesh.

"It's not a personal achievement. Rather it's an achievement for all women in the country. We represent them in an esteemed organisation like the BAF," said Nayma, who was commissioned in the air force in December 2011.

"The door to this opportunity has opened today. Inshallah, more women will come in this profession in the future," she said.

Why did she choose this risky and challenging path of life?

"I don't see it as a risky profession but as an opportunity to serve the country," said a proud, confident Nayma.

Similar conviction was found in Tamanna.

"I am feeling proud after completing the solo flying. My parents encouraged me from my childhood to take part in daring tasks. It's because of their inspiration I joined the air force in the first place and became a pilot today," said the flying officer, commissioned in the BAF in December 2012.

Both the pilots said their immediate objective was to successfully complete all the trainings.

However, the task was not an easy one. Had they failed yesterday, they would have never got the chance again.

This is perhaps why the moment their choppers touched down at the BAF Base, air force officers burst out in

applause to hail the girls for successfully attaining the qualification to become combat pilots.

"These two pilots' feat is a milestone in the history of the BAF... It is only the beginning. I believe the female officers will move forward with their skills and competence," said Air Officer Commanding (AOC) M Sayed Hossain of the base, after awarding squadron badges to the two newest military pilots.

They have proved that women in Bangladesh have succeeded in all sorts of professions, he said.

However, trainings of the two are far from over yet.

"They are conducting basic conversion training and will go to the operational flying squadron and will take part in all operational activities like UN missions, search and rescue and disaster management after completing all the trainings," said the AOC.

The female pilots would be trained

to take part in war as well, he added. "I wish bright, prosperous and safe future for these two young pilots."

Wing Commander Ahmed Asif Akhter and Squadron Leader Bashir Ahmed conducted the flying examinations while Air Commodore Hasan Mahmud and AOC Sayed accompanied the duo as safety pilots during the solo flights. After the tests, all the officers at the base celebrated the historic moment by cutting a cake. Later, Group Captain ATM Habibur Rahman, officer commanding of the base's operational wing, moved a vote of thanks.

The air force began inducting female officers in 2000 to become the first among the three armed forces to do so. The highest rank a female officer holds in the BAF at the moment is Senior Squadron Leader. Two more female BAF officers will start training for becoming military pilots from January.

2 suspects

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Md Manik alias Kana, 28, of Barguna - to apprehend some other robbers, said police.

Sensing police presence, the criminals opened fire on them and fled. Apart from Hasan and Manik, three police personnel also sustained bullet injuries, said AKM Mohiuddin Selim, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, adding that they found two firearms on the spot.

The two "robbers" were arrested from the capital's Khilgaon area in a police drive on Monday night.

"Five tolas of gold looted from the Chittagong jewellery shops was recovered from their possession," said Selim.

Based on information obtained from them, police later arrested seven of their cohorts raiding several places of Chittagong from Tuesday afternoon to early yesterday, the OC added.

"We are carrying out raids to arrest the other robbers," he said, adding that, four firearms, 15 bullets and three cartridges were recovered from the seven arrestees.

Meanwhile, three more cases have been filed with Kotwali and Bandar police stations over the "assault" on police and recovery of the weapons.

On Saturday, a gang of robbers stormed Gini Gold Jewellers and Aparupa Jewellers in a market in front of Bangladesh Bank in the port city, cleaned out the showcases, and fled exploding bombs.

The explosion killed Md Syed, a 45-year-old street hawker.

The alleged prime suspect Intiaz Uddin alias Babul was arrested within hours after the robbery in a police raid.

Impact study

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Joymoni in Chandpai on Tuesday.

The team will assess the impacts of the oil spill on the germination process, seedlings and saplings of mangrove plants, grass and herbs at the study sites.

"We need to continue the work for two to three years to understand the impacts of the oil spill on mangrove plants," said Nirmal Kumar Paul, divisional forest officer (management and planning) in Khulna.

The team will regularly monitor the affected mangrove plants at 36 spots -- nine square metres each -- on both banks of the Shela river, where an oil tanker sank on December 9, and nearby canals.

It would also conduct the same study at several other spots in the forest where oil hasn't spread, he said.

"We will compare our findings with the results of similar field studies conducted here before the oil spill," said Dr SM Feroz, assistant director of the research cell at Khulna University.

They will now monitor and collect data at the sites for around a week. Then they will collect data after every one or two weeks, and assess the changes.

"We haven't yet got any fund for the work. But we don't have time to waste. So we launched this study, leaving aside our work in other projects," said Nirmal.

There are at least 334 species of plant in the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest and also a UNESCO world heritage site.

GOVT SEEKS UN HELP

The government has requested the UN to provide it with necessary assistance in tackling the oil spill in the Sundarbans.

Finance ministry's Economic Relations Division on Monday sought UNDP's help for cleaning up the affected area, assessing the situation and developing an action plan.

The finance ministry made the move on request from the environment ministry.

Talking to this correspondent, Khandakar Rakibur Rahman, additional secretary of the environment ministry, said the UNDP hinted that a UN team of experts would fly to Dhaka very soon.

Bangladesh sought assistance after the UN expressed its willingness to give assistance in this regard, he said.

Contacted yesterday, a UNDP official in Dhaka said they would talk about the issue today.

Survivors tell of chaos, terror

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premises than relatives of the dead and injured.

"It was chaos when I arrived here at about 1:30pm," says Hafeez Ahmad.

"People were searching for their relatives in half madness, running from door to door, making frantic inquiries at information desks.

"It took me another hour to track down my brother. I thought he would be dead but he had survived, and they had taken him into the operating theatre for surgery."

His brother, Zulfiqar Ahmad, 45, is the head of the mathematics department at the Army Public School (APS).

Hafeez Ahmad says he received a phone call from another of his brothers who works in Kabul in neighbouring Afghanistan, telling him that there had been an attack on the APS and he

had just seen a video clip of a victim on TV who looked like Zulfiqar.

Zulfiqar Ahmad is still groggy from anaesthesia, but makes an effort to speak to me.

He says he was conducting his mathematics class on the second floor of the school's central wing when he first heard the gun shots.

"There was panic in the classroom and some students rushed out to see what was going on, but they soon came rushing back in. One of them closed the door and put on the latch."

But the gunmen broke down the door and started shooting indiscriminately.

"I was hit in the left arm, in the left side of my chest, and twice on my left thigh. I fell to the ground. I must have been lying there for an hour before the army soldiers came in and moved me to the hospital. I tried to turn on my

right side to prevent bleeding from my arm, but I couldn't move."

He says there were 18 students in the class and he believes that none of them survived.

He says the gunmen looked like Uzbeks and were heavily armed.

But the highest death toll was from the auditorium where a team from the army's Combined Military Hospital (CMH) was conducting a workshop on first aid for the students of eighth, ninth and 10th grades, all between 14 and 16 years of age.

Four of them share LRH's emergency room with Zulfiqar Ahmad.

One of them, Mohammad Hilal, a 10th grader, took three bullets in his arm and legs.

"I didn't notice the gunmen rushing in, and was hit when they fired the first shots," he says.

He was sitting in the middle of the

hall. After being hit, he fell to the floor.

"I think I passed out for a while. I thought I was dreaming. I wanted to move but felt paralysed. Then I came to and realised that actually two other boys had fallen on me. Both of them were dead."

He said he wanted to move, but just then one of the boys in the front row who had earlier ducked under his desk tried to run away. Gunfire rang out, and the boy fell in the aisle between the rows of desks, not far from him.

"He had been hit in the neck. He sludged for a while... before going cold. I sank my head to the floor and lay still."

Anas Khan, 14, an eighth grader, remembers seeing the men coming in through the door. He says the workshop had just started when the attack took place.

"When firing started, we all ducked

under our desks. I got hit because I didn't notice that my elbow was outside the line of the desk."

Though almost 140 people - most of them children - died in the attack, the army says it was able to evacuate more than 900 children to safety.

Among them were two children of Mushtaq Yusufzai, a Peshawar-based newspaper correspondent.

But from what his 11-year-old son told him later, they were rescued by their female teacher and the school's female principal.

"My son says when they heard the first shots, their teacher concealed them and said it must be firing in the air, like in weddings. But then she went out, and came rushing back in, and told the children to fall in the queue and get out."

The junior section, where Yusufzai's children were studying, is located away

from the middle and secondary sections. The teacher herded the children towards a back entrance, shouting all the time "Run, run".

Then the children saw the principal. She was also running, and shouting to the children, "run, run". She disappeared in another direction while the class teacher got the children out through the back door and into a nearby house.

After a while she herded them to another house further away. Then finally she got them out and told them to run across the fields to an amusement park and wait there.

"We collected the children from the park several hours later," he says.

Officials say the principal of the school was among those who died. But Yusufzai was among the more fortunate parents on that dreadful day.