



Containers waiting for shipment at Chittagong Port where business is as usual despite hartal and blockade enforced by the BNP-led 20-party alliance. The photo was taken last month.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

Hartal becomes work-vibrant

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Initially but the situation is improving.

Traders said they are trying to recover losses incurred during the hartals and blockade.

Life in the capital has been normal for quite sometime now. The thick city traffic would hardly give the sense of any blockade and hartal. Some areas are even witnessing usual tailbacks.

Khandaker Enayet Ullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Malik Samity, claimed that the country's road communication is almost normal now.

Almost cent percent trucks and lorries, 80 percent buses and mini-buses, and 60 to 70 percent long-haul buses are plying the highways now, he told this newspaper.

Owner of ENA Transport Private Ltd, Enayet, however, said they were incurring losses every day, especially on the long routes, due to lack of passengers.

Our correspondents in major cities and districts found a similar picture of normal public life and business.

In Chittagong, strikes seem to

have little impact on day-to-day life. A large number of buses, trucks and other vehicles have been plying the streets in and outside the port city over the last few weeks, according to leaders of bus owners' association and police.

"Nowadays I often get stuck at some busy intersections of the city as hundreds of vehicles run on roads defying hartals," said Munir of Katgor in the city.

Employees and workers of different factories said they could not stay back at home anymore as they had to earn their living.

"Is it possible for anyone to stay home for two consecutive months?" questioned Mohammed Enamul Huq Munir, an official at a shipping firm in Agrabad.

Almost all educational institutions are open with normal academic activities. Some schools and colleges resumed normal activities last month.

Mohammed Gias Uddin, head teacher of Chittagong Collegiate School and College, said classes and exams at his institution have been going on in full swing since March 8.

Presence of students has increased significantly in recent weeks, he added.

Residents in Khulna city have defied the hartals and blockade. Production in the industrial areas has been smooth.

Besides, all modes of transport are plying the highways connecting the divisional city to Dhaka, Kushtia, Barisal and Chittagong.

"We don't find any difference between a hartal and a normal day as everything here is normal now," said Abul Kashem, an employee at a private firm.

Life is returning to normalcy in all five upazilas of Chapainawabganj, a stronghold of Jamaat-e-Islami.

Although trucks from Sonamasjid Land Port were being escorted by law enforcers to other districts around one and a half months ago, transportation of goods-laden trucks has become normal now.

The town's four major shopping malls -- Chapainawabganj New Market, Shaheed Satu Hall Market, Abdul Mannan Sentu Market and DC Market -- resumed business last week after over a month. The other markets and shops in and outside the

town were doing business as usual.

Students are attending classes regularly at different schools and colleges.

In Rajshahi, most city streets are witnessing gridlocks while markets are open. Many passengers, though, are still afraid of travelling by bus on long routes.

The railway authorities are struggling to serve the increased number of passengers, said Abdul Karim, superintendent at Rajshahi Railway Station.

Businessman Shariful Islam of the city's Boaliapara said, "Political programmes have now turned out to be a farce. Everyone has to come out of their homes to earn their living."

Though the people of Mymensingh were worried about the political violence at the early stage of the blockade, everything is getting normal in the district.

Our correspondents Minhaj Uddin from Chittagong, Ahsanul Ameen George from Khulna, Rabiul Hasan Dolar from Chapainawabganj, Anwar Ali from Rajshahi and Aminul Islam from Mymensingh contributed to the report.

Mystery deepens over Putin's whereabouts

THE TELEGRAPH

The mystery over the whereabouts of Vladimir Putin deepened yesterday as Russian state media broadcast – then retracted – reports that he had hosted an official visit from the President of Kyrgyzstan.

Putin has remained hidden from public view for nine days. Levels of fear and uncertainty in Moscow have been rising as rumours fly over what could be behind Putin's lengthy disappearance.

The Kremlin has repeatedly denied that there is anything amiss with the Russian leader, batting away suggestions that he is ill, dead, victim of a palace coup or in Switzerland to be by his girlfriend's side as she gives birth.

Putin's next public appearance is scheduled for Monday, when he is due to meet Almazbek Atambayev, the President of Kyrgyzstan, in Saint Petersburg.

But that encounter was thrown into confusion on Friday night as announcers on state television, apparently reading from an incorrect script, described the meeting in the past tense.

Rossiya 24, the channel involved, later described the incident as a "mis-

take", but the blunder deepened suspicions that state media is covering up for Putin's unexplained absence.

On Friday, ostensibly new footage of Putin meeting a senior Russian judge at his residence was shown on state television but failed to quell the speculation. Such clips are often recorded in advance, and released when the authorities give the go-ahead. Meanwhile, Swiss media reported that Alina Kabaeva, a gymnast turned parliamentarian who is allegedly Putin's girlfriend, had flown to Lugano, Switzerland to give birth to a baby girl at the private clinic of Santa'Anna di Sorengo.

But the Swiss reports diverged on when the former gymnast had given birth.

Gymnast turned politician Alina Kabaeva is reputedly in a relationship with Putin

A tabloid, Bilk, claimed that Putin was present when his 32-year-old alleged lover gave birth to the baby, purportedly explaining his public absence. Other local reports said that the Russian leader had reserved two rooms at the clinic, one for his girlfriend and the other for her bodyguards, and had himself stayed with friends nearby.

UN disaster meeting opens in Japan

AFP, Sendai

poorest".

Policymakers gathered for a ten-yearly meeting on disaster risk reduction yesterday, with hopes high that the conference in tsunami-hit Japan might provide a springboard for efforts to tackle natural disasters and costly climate change.

The meeting came as a huge tropical cyclone smashed into Vanuatu in the South Pacific, terrifying residents and causing fears Saturday that dozens of people may have died.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said he had met the president of Vanuatu that morning and conveyed "our deepest condolences" as well as solidarity with the people of the archipelago.

"What we are discussing here today is very real for millions of people in the world," he said in a speech.

Ban, who has highlighted the rise in extreme weather as global warming has accelerated over the past 10 years, also said: "Disaster risk reduction is a front-line defence against the impacts of climate change."

"It is a smart investment for business and a wise investment in saving lives," he said.

A report by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) said global economic losses from disasters cost an average of \$250 billion to \$300 billion annually.

"Two thirds of natural disasters come from climate change," French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told AFP ahead of his attendance in the conference.

Fabius is president of the COP 21 conference on climate change, which will be held in Paris in December.

"A success in Sendai may prefigure that of Paris," he said, adding that he wants to draw up a scheme in which all territories and vulnerable populations have a disaster early warning system.

In a conference speech, Fabius said more than 70 countries were identified as particularly vulnerable and exposed to "extreme weather events" -- typhoons, torrential rain, storms and sand or snow.

Rich countries are not "immune" to impact of climate change, he said "but the most exposed countries are the

No talks with Khaleda

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consider people as human beings. "On top of it, she's the leader of the militants. Who will hold dialogue with a militant leader?"

Before the January 5 election last year, Hasina added, she had invited the BNP chairperson for a dialogue, but to no avail. "I had tried a lot, I had said ... let's participate in the election, even I offered to involve the BNP in the election-time government with some ministries, but she didn't respond."

Hasina advised Khaleda to surrender before court as an arrest warrant had been issued against her.

She also said if the BNP chief did

not surrender before court, the government would be bound to act as per the court order. "And that order will be implemented in time."

Hasina said her government would do everything necessary to end the "miserable days created by Khaleda Zia". "This is our commitment," she said, adding that she needed cooperation from all in this regard.

The PM said the BNP leader had no right to indulge in things that only harm the nation. "People won't accept this, they won't tolerate it," she said.

Hasina said Khaleda had failed to create any movement involving the people of the country.

"We too had waged movement, but that was with support from the people. That was a mass movement, the people of the country came out on the roads," she said, recalling that their movement had forced Khaleda's government to step down on March 30, 1996, after holding a voter-less election on February 16 the same year.

Reiterating that boycotting the 10th general election was a political mistake of Khaleda Zia, she said the BNP leader is now taking revenge on people.

"Why do people have to pay for your wrong decision? It's not easy to play with the fate of our people. At least, I won't allow this as long as I'm

alive," she went on.

"She [Khaleda] didn't get any response from those on whom she relies ... north or west, no country responded to her call because of her militant character, no one supports burning people to death."

Samannay Parishad President Justice AFM Mesbah Uddin Ahmed presided over the rally and Secretary General Prof Kamrul Hasan Khan delivered the welcome address.

PM's Media Adviser Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam, Dhaka University Vice-Chancellor Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique, among others, spoke on the occasion.

No law enforcement

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the media that they were unaware of the BNP leader going missing.

The IGP yesterday said, "He [Salahuddin] was wanted and we had been looking for him as he stands accused in different cases. But we could not trace him."

He said they were looking into Salahuddin's family allegation that he is traceless.

"We are investigating to find out how he [Salahuddin] went missing. If he is really missing, then it's our duty to find him out," Shahidul said.

Hasina Ahmed, Salahuddin's wife, said on Wednesday she went to the Uttara [West] Police Station, but police did not accept her general diary in connection with her husband going "missing".

Following a petition by her, the High Court on Thursday asked the

government to explain why it should not be directed to trace and produce Salahuddin before the court at 10:30am today.

Salahuddin, a former state minister, frequently announced hartals by issuing press releases on behalf of the BNP-led 20-party alliance.

Doing business getting tough

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Entrepreneurs said the costs of doing business have gone up by 20 to 30 percent, and even more in some cases.

Orion Group, one of the leading industrial conglomerates in the country, faces delay and cost escalation in implementing two new projects.

"Our project to set up LPG plant is delayed by three months," said Salman Karim, managing director of Orion Group that has operations in pharmaceuticals, energy and power, cosmetics, textiles and garment sectors.

The group's project for manufacturing refrigerators, a joint venture with a Singaporean company, is also getting delayed.

"Since we reached an agreement that we will go into production by the end of this year, we have to do it

despite a rise in costs," said Karim.

Standard Group, a big garment manufacturer and exporter, had to ship apparel items by air to meet the deadline. "Otherwise, the buyer would have cancelled the order," said Mosharraf Hussain, managing director of the Group.

"Now buyers do not come to Bangladesh. They ask us to meet them in other countries," he said.

Steel giant BSRM is also facing problems in expanding its capacities amid political unrest, said Aameer Alihussain, managing director of the company.

Leading bicycle exporter Meghna Group had to take two foreign buyers to its factory by a helicopter, which cost it Tk 1 lakh each trip last month.

Rising costs of doing business and disruption in supply chain have been affecting exporters and domes-

tic market players, say analysts.

"There has been a rise in air shipments, which are four to five times costlier than shipments by cargo vessels, in the last two months. This has led to cost escalation," said Prof Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Exporters, who got orders several months ago, have to supply products at higher costs, he said.

"High costs of doing business are putting additional pressure on exporters and their profit margin is going down," said Monzur Hossain, senior research fellow at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

If the political deadlock persists for a longer period, the losses will be irrecoverable and entrepreneurs will lose their competitive advantage, said a number of businesspeople.

According to data of the Board of Investment (BoI), 18 foreign investment proposals involving \$81 million were registered with the BoI in the last two months.

"The figure is a bit low, but it is not because of politics," said BoI Executive Member Nabhash Chandra Mandal.

Usually, flow of foreign investments remains low in the post-election year, he said.

Asked whether any meetings with foreign investors were cancelled due to the ongoing blockade and shutdowns, Nabhash said he held a series of such meetings since January.

"No scheduled meeting was deferred or cancelled," he claimed.

In its Cost of Doing Business Report 2015, the World Bank put Bangladesh in the 173rd position among 189 economies, down from 170th position last year.

Govt to vaccinate

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labs will be vaccinated, he said.

Screening of travellers from India has also begun at the ports since the last week of February with the virus spreading in West Bengal since mid-February.

"We have already vaccinated many of the health personnel at the IEDCR and the airport in Dhaka," Dr Shamsuzzaman told The Daily Star. He added that all frontline health workers who are at risks will be vaccinated in phases.

The DGHS has already purchased swine flu vaccine for 1,200 health workers and is preparing for purchasing more soon, he said.

Health officials say the authorities are keeping close watch on H1N1 virus, which caused deaths of 8 people in the country during a pandemic in 2009-2010.

They said the risks should have been lower as drugs and vaccines have been developed to fight H1N1 virus, but the fact that the virus has already infected a large number of people in India this year is something worrisome.

Researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA, in an article on Wednesday said the genetic information of two Indian strains, deposited in public databases in the past two years, revealed new mutations that could make the virus more deadly.

But India's National Institute of Virology said in a statement on Thursday that the findings were incorrect, according to Times of India.

Professor Dr Be-Nazir Ahmed at the National Institute of Preventive and Social Medicine (NIPSO) said it is yet to be proved that H1N1 virus has changed its formation, but its possibility cannot be rejected.

"Whatever the case, what we need to do now is to strengthen health screening of the passengers from India at the international ports and be ready with necessary drugs and vaccines," he said.

Dr Shamsuzzaman said the government is putting high priority on preventive measures and already has a stock of drugs and is going to buy more vaccines to enhance its capacity to fight the virus.