

JS budget session starts June 1

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Jatiya Sangsad goes into the budget session on June 1. President Abdul Hamid last night convened the budget session as per the constitutional mandate, a release of the Parliament Secretariat said.

This will be the sixth session of the 10th parliament formed through the January 5 election boycotted by the BNP-led 20-party alliance and most other political parties.

The last session was prorogued on April 3 with 39 working days.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith is likely to place the budget for fiscal 2015-16 on June 4.

This will be the second budget of the Awami League government formed on January 12.

EU sees Bangladesh as full-fledged economic partner

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

European Union Ambassador in Dhaka Pierre Mayaudon has said the EU aims at bringing forward Bangladesh from a status of supplier of garment to a fully-fledged economic partner.

"This country deserves better than the image associated to low-cost and cheap labour," he told a reception organised on the occasion of Europe Day 2015 at Westin Hotel on Sunday.

"This would do justice to the millions of actors of this silent revolution which is gradually taking Bangladesh out of poverty."

He added launch of the new Multi-annual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2014-2020 identified the main avenues of development cooperation for the next seven years, namely education and skills development, nutrition and food security, and strengthening democratic governance.

"The creation of a new institution -- the EU Business Council Bangladesh -- aims at bringing forward Bangladesh from a status of supplier of garment to a fully-fledged economic partner," he said.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali also spoke on the occasion.

Speaking on economic field, the EU ambassador said implementation of the Sustainability Compact adopted two years ago after the Rana Plaza tragedy had captured their attention.

"We are glad that Bangladesh has been the world's most successful country in benefiting from the EU GSP/EBA market access regime," Mayaudon said.

He also listed out EU initiatives, including launch of an awareness campaign on HORIZON 2020, the new EU Research and Innovation mega programme.

"We are convinced that it will accompany your country in bringing to reality two very inspiring visions: Digital Bangladesh and Blue Economy," said the EU envoy.

On a photo exhibition styled "Women and Girls" arranged on the occasion of the Europe Day, he said it was also the occasion to flag that "we, in the EU, together with our 28 member states, meaning Europe altogether, have put gender balance and women empowerment very high on our international agenda."

Fakhrul, Moudud

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According to the case statement, Fakhrul, Moudud and 24 others along with 1,000 to 1,200 unnamed activists brought out a protest procession in front of Twin Tower in the city's Shantinagar area on March 2, 2013.

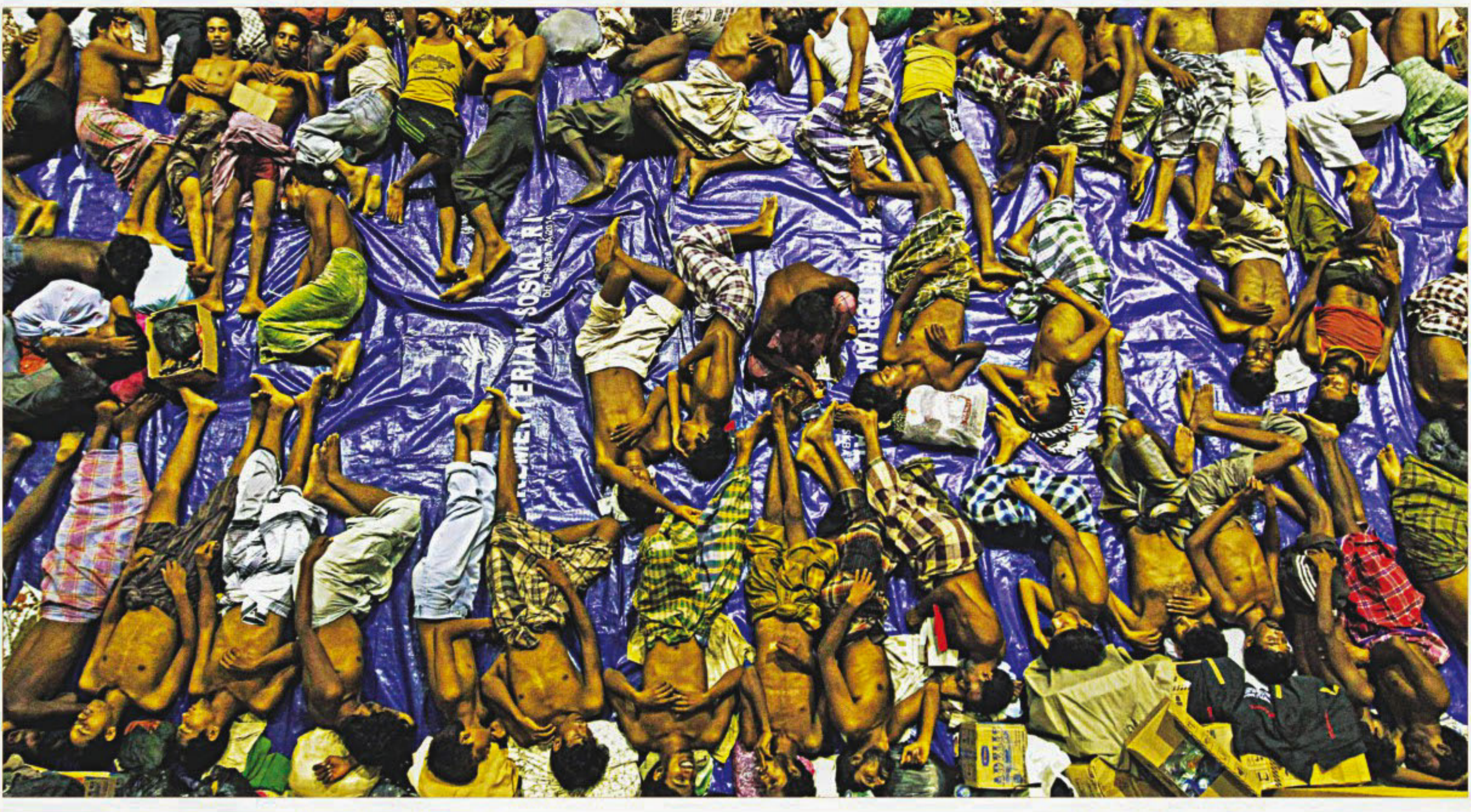
At one stage, they hurled five crude bombs at policemen and damaged several vehicles, leaving several law enforcers seriously injured.

A case was filed later with Paltan police against Fakhrul, Moudud, Goyeshwar, Noman and 22 others for their alleged involvement in the incidents.

Fakhrul, accused in over 70 criminal cases, was arrested on January 6 as he came out of the Jatiya Press Club in Dhaka, around 24 hours after he took shelter there amid protest by pro-government journalists.

He was shown arrested in eight arson cases filed with different police stations.

Detectives also on May 6 pressed murder charges against BNP Chairperson Khaleida Zia and 37 others, mostly her party men, for their alleged involvement in the January 23 petrol bomb attack on a bus in the capital's Jatrabari.



Trafficking victims housed at a shelter after being rescued in Indonesia's Aceh province yesterday. Bottom right, an Indonesia policeman distributes used clothes to the migrants.

1,400 victims rescued

FROM PAGE 1

"We know that there are more boats out there that want to come in," Langkawi police chief Harith Kam Abdullah told AFP, citing police intelligence.

Indonesian authorities said they intercepted a boat off the coast of the northwestern province of Aceh early Monday with estimates of at least 400 people aboard, a day after 573 people described by one official as "sad, tired and distressed" came to shore in Aceh.

At least 92 children were among those brought ashore in Malaysia and Indonesia.

The vessel discovered off Indonesia on Monday was still at sea, shadowed by the country's navy, said naval spokesman Manahan Simorangkir.

He said the vessel was damaged but afloat and its captain had fled. The navy was supplying the ship with water and food but the spokesman said there were currently no plans to allow it to berth.

8,000 STRANDED AT SEA

Thousands of refugees from Bangladesh and Myanmar are stranded at sea close to Thailand, according to an international migration agency.

The International Organization for Migration told the BBC a Thai crackdown on recent arrivals meant many smugglers were now reluctant to land.

As many as 8,000 people are believed to be stuck on boats, the IOM said.

Jeff Labovitz, head of mission for IOM Asia Pacific, told the BBC that the discovery last week of dozens of human remains in abandoned camps in the south of Thailand had prompted a police crackdown and therefore people smugglers were holding their boats at sea.

"Boats seem to have stopped coming - but some are en route and some are waiting to off-load. Where they used to process people on land, for final payments, they are now doing this off-shore - so more people are being held off-shore. Now things have become so hot, there's nowhere for them to go," Mr Labovitz said.

He said that an estimate by the Arakan Project - which monitors the movements of Rohingyas - that 8,000 people are stranded at sea could not be verified, but seemed credible.

BRACING FOR FURTHER ARRIVALS

Aceh provincial search and rescue chief Budiawan, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told AFP authorities were bracing for further arrivals.

"We are on standby and ready to rescue them when we receive an alert," Budiawan said.

Abdul Rahim, a 25-year-old Bangladeshi who swam ashore Sunday on Langkawi, told AFP he endured a 28-day journey on a ship operated by

Myanmar smugglers and packed with hundreds of other people amid appalling conditions.

He was among about 300 Bangladeshi men who were being fed and tended to at a police detention centre badminton court, most of them shirtless and looking thin, weak and haggard.

"We were given only very little food and water. When I asked for more I was beaten with sticks and metal rods," he said, showing a two-inch gash on his back.

His ship had been bound from Bangladesh for Malaysia but the passengers were not expecting to be ordered into the surf off Langkawi.

Activists and refugee groups say the Thai crackdown may be leaving many migrants stuck on overcrowded ships or at risk of being dumped at sea by nervous smugglers.

"Thailand has tried to prevent traffickers from continuing their business... so that has forced them to go somewhere else," said Chris Lewa from The Arakan Project, a Rohingya rights group, who believes thousands may be at sea.

Migrants are "just trying to disembark before they die", she added.

'THE ROOT' OF THE PROBLEM

Buddhist-majority Myanmar views its population of Rohingya, estimated at more than a million, as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, with an

official from the Myanmar president's office insisting that Bangladesh was at "the root" of the problem.

"The issue is whether these people -- who say they are from Myanmar -- really come from Myanmar," Zaw Htay told AFP on Monday, adding that the government did not "accept" the term Rohingya.

Rohingya have been targeted in outbreaks of sectarian violence in Myanmar in recent years, prompting many to flee. The UN considers Rohingya to be among the world's most persecuted minorities.

Boatloads have arrived off Aceh in the past, typically after becoming lost or running out of fuel.

Those who straggled ashore in Aceh on Sunday had been en route from Thailand to Malaysia, according to accounts by migrants and officials there.

They were falsely told they had arrived in Malaysia -- a relatively prosperous magnet for migrants for surrounding nations -- and ordered to swim to shore.

They included 83 women and 41 children, said Darsa, a local disaster management agency official. One woman was pregnant and some of the children were aged under 10.

"Some of them were not doing too well and needed medical attention," Darsa said.

100 camps, 10,000 held captive

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There could be up to 70 camps in Songkhla alone, scattered throughout the province and run by a network gangs. These may also cover Nakhon Si Thammarat and parts of Bangkok, said Ari Areef, chairman of the non-profit group Ummatee Thailand.

However, he said, there was insufficient evidence to back this claim, which could spur the ongoing crackdown on people traffickers and smugglers. Ari estimated that more than 1,000 bodies could eventually be found in the four southern provinces, saying it was now time for drastic suppression of Rohingya trafficking.

"All we need now is time and opportunity for good officials to expose and

tackle the problem, and all truths would be revealed," he said.

Meanwhile, a senior internal security source said Article 44, a measure in the interim charter, is likely to be utilised to drive the ongoing crackdown on Rohingya trafficking, regardless of delay or success of a complete scan of detention camps and relevant illegal activities in southern provinces after a 10-day deadline imposed by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha.

Ari said a group of Rohingya who fled persecution in Myanmar about five years ago started trafficking operations, but there was no torture or assault of fellow Rohingya at that time. They only demanded fees for trans-

porting fellow Rohingya to destinations such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia through Thailand after leaving Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Violence, torture and murder had been committed later, while ransoms were demanded from relatives of boat people held captive back in their original home areas in Bangladesh and Myanmar. But Ari did not specify whether the violence or demands for money was done by Rohingya or local people. Ransom demands ranged from Bt20,000 to Bt120,000, he said. The abuse of Rohingya varied depending on the traffickers and guards. Men were often beaten during telephone calls, so their relatives could hear their suffering and would send money. Adult

women were raped by smugglers/traffickers and crews on fishing trawlers if detained on vessels, and later sold as prostitutes in Malaysia or to rubber plantations to "serve" male rubber tappers.

Rohingya men would be killed in front of all others, if they reacted or attempt to help the women -- to scare off those trying to resist.

Young children of both sexes were separated from their mothers and cared for by outsiders, but details of their fate were unknown.

Those whose relatives agreed to cooperate were often treated better or received better welfare after the gangs received money, but ransoms were often demanded again, he said.

A Mother's Day gift

FROM PAGE 1

students who were protesting police failures to arrest those sex predators.

We have seen the videos and still pictures of Sunday's assault time and again and shuddered in aghast, thinking how brutal our police force that we raised with our tax could be on our children. We saw them hitting a young boy of about 20 with a truncheon with so much force that the stick got broken. The truncheon fell right across the forehead of the lean boy and his body wreathed with agony. I wonder whether he had any brain injury.

They were all commies, as the capitalists would taunt them. They belonged to the Bangladesh Chhatra Union, the leftist student organisation. Interestingly, when numerous girls were groped and molested by a group of boys at TSC, no organisations other than Chhatra Union protested it. The ruling Awami League's student front Bangladesh Chhatra League remained mysteriously and shamefully silent.

And what was the Dhaka University's stance? The vice chancellor, AAMS Arefin Siddique, after a lot of

protests had been made, came up with the explanation that while it is a natural tendency of protesters to overdo, the administration always plays things down. He also said if even 10 percent of what the media reported was true, then it would be very condemnable and embarrassing!

Police who so valiantly attacked the protesters on Sunday also claimed there was no such incident and no sexual assault and that only some "pushing and shoving" happened during the New Year celebration. As if shoving a girl is okay with them. Not a single criminal has been arrested.

So when police swooped on the protesters, it only reflected the government and the administration's indifferent attitude towards the New Year incident. We are shocked because we as civilised human beings expected rational reaction from the authorities. We should not have.

Suddenly, I remember the 2013 incident in Rajshahi where one brave woman rescued a police officer who came under brutal attacks by Jamaat activists.

Corrected land bill passed in 15 minutes

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The historic India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement Bill, which contained some drafting errors when passed by Parliament last week, was yesterday again cleared by the Rajya Sabha.

The Constitution amendment Bill to allow the operationalisation of the 1974 India-Bangladesh Land Boundary agreement was cleared by both the Houses unanimously last week. But there was an error in numbering of the bill because of which it had to be approved again.

The official amendment was carried out in the short title of the bill. But due to an oversight, the same amendment could not be carried out in the schedules of the bill.

While it was introduced as the 119th Amendment Bill 2013, it should have been passed as 100th Amendment Act 2015. This is because several constitu-

tion amendment bills are introduced but the number of those which clear Parliament is less.

The Bill was passed yesterday in Rajya Sabha in 15 minutes after External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj moved it in the House.

Leader of Opposition Ghulam Nabi Azad said, "It has caused an embarrassment for the House, more so as it concerns an international agreement."

He said the officials concerned in drafting the bills should go "line by line" to avoid errors.

Swaraj said the Lok Sabha had passed the bill with the necessary amendments and therefore it was moved in the Rajya Sabha once again yesterday.

She hailed both the Houses for unanimously passing it.

The bill seeks to settle India's 41-year-old border issue with Bangladesh and ratify exchange of 162 enclaves adversely held by the two countries.

3 human traffickers arrested

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Police yesterday arrested three suspected human traffickers in Cox's Bazar's Teknaf upazila.

The arrestees were identified as Khair Hossain, Ali Hossain and Abdur Rahman. All of them hail from Teknaf upazila.

As all the arrestees stand accused in at least one case filed for human trafficking, police raided their houses in the early hours of yesterday and arrested them, said Ataur Rahman Khondokar, officer-in-charge of Teknaf Model Police Station.

They would be sent to the court, the OC told our Cox's Bazar correspondent.

The details of the charges against the arrestees could not be known immediately.

Following discovery of mass graves in Thai jungles, police are conducting raids in Teknaf and Ukhia upazilas, from where human traffickers put the poor jobseekers on trawlers to send them to Malaysia by sea illegally.

On Friday and Monday last, four alleged human traffickers were killed in "gunfights" with law enforcement agencies.

Ticfa with US 'meaningless'

Says Tofail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed yesterday said the signing of Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement (Ticfa) with the US is "meaningless" as Bangladesh's GSP status is not restored yet.

After a series of negotiations for years, Bangladesh entered the Ticfa with the US in November 2013 hoping that the GSP (Generalised System of Preferences) would be restored. It was suspended by the Obama administration in June 2013 for serious lapses in workplace safety and poor labour rights.

The US government set 16 conditions for the Bangladesh government and garment entrepreneurs to reinstate the GSP facility for Bangladeshi products.

"We've fulfilled all the 16 conditions, but the GSP has not been revived for us. The US government provided the African least developed countries with the duty free facility under different names, but not us. So signing of the Ticfa is meaningless for us," the minister told the inauguration ceremony of the Bangladesh Denim Expo at the Radisson Blu Dhaka Water Garden hotel.

"Bangladesh has been enjoying duty-free access to so many countries and regions like the EU, Canada, Japan, India and China. But unfortunately we don't enjoy any duty benefit on export of garment to the US market and GSP was suspended for Bangladesh."

For many countries, the export duty rates to the US are too low, but in case of Bangladesh it is more than 16 percent and the country paid \$4.1 billion as duty to the US customs over the last five years, said Tofail.

Pierre Mayaudon, head of the European Union delegation in Bangladesh; Benoit-Pierre Laramée, Canadian high commissioner in Dhaka; Gerben Sjoerd de Jong, high commissioner of the Netherlands to Bangladesh; Atiqul Islam, president of BGMEA; and Abdus Salam Murshedy, president of Bangladesh Exporters Association; also spoke.

The Ticfa is a platform for resolving trade disputes between the two countries through discussions.

2 Bangladeshi

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Patharghata upazila in Barguna, said a foreign ministry press release yesterday.

This is the first incident of such killings of Bangladeshis by the Houthi rebels.

The incidents took place while the Bangladeshis were working at their respective work places in Najran, a southeastern region of Saudi Arabia (650km away from Jeddah and 50km from Yemen border).

The bodies were kept in the mortuary of the King Khaled Hospital in Najran.

Bangladesh Consulate General in Jeddah is coordinating with the deceased workers' employers to send back the bodies and for realisation of compensation. It may also arrange burial of the deceased in line with the desire of the family members of the victims.

The Bangladesh government brought back more than 500 of its nationals from Yemen through the assistance of Indian ships and planes last month when the Saudi-led allied forces and the Houthis started fighting against each other intensively.

The border area has been a flashpoint for Saudi-Houthi clashes amid a Saudi-led coalition's air campaign targeting the rebels in Yemen.