

Govt cuts interest rates on savings

REJAUL KARIM BYRON And MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

The government has slashed deposit rates on savings instruments by up to two percentage points to reduce its borrowing as well as prop up banks' deposit collection.

The interest rate on the five-year family savings certificates has been brought down to 11.52 percent from 13.45 percent, according to a circular of the Internal Resources Division of the finance ministry yesterday.

The five-year pensioner savings schemes saw its interest rate slashed to 11.76 percent from 13.19 percent.

The rate cuts came into effect yesterday. However, those who bought the bonds before yesterday would keep enjoying the earlier rates.

The deposit rate on the three-year post office savings certificates came down to 11.28 percent from 13.24 percent. For Bangladesh Savings Certificates, the rate is fixed at 11.28

percent from 13.19 percent.

The three-year profit-based savings certificates saw their deposit rates go down to 11.04 percent from 12.59 percent.

The government, however, kept unchanged the rate on the five-year wage earners development bond at 12 percent.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith recently admitted the rates of savings instruments were very high compared to the yields on deposit rates offered by banks.

Banks too complained of facing difficulties in wooing deposits as savers rushed to buy the national certificates for higher yields.

The sales of savings instruments soared 77.41 percent year-on-year to Tk 26,533 crore between July and February, according to government statistics. The government had aimed to keep the borrowing within Tk 9,056 crore for the whole fiscal year.



Illegal migrants, rescued by the Myanmar navy on Thursday, are seen at a Muslim religious school used as a temporary refugee camp at Aletankyaw of the Rakhine state yesterday. The authorities keep on claiming that the migrants were "Bengalis" even though it is suspected that they are Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Myanmar. Myanmar's government has reiterated its refusal to recognise the stateless Rohingyas as an ethnic group, preferring to call them "Bengalis".

PHOTO: REUTERS

Myanmar to deport rescued migrants

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More than 3,500 migrants have swum to shore or been rescued off the coasts of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Bangladesh since a Thai crackdown on human-trafficking in early May threw the illicit trade into chaos.

Myanmar has faced increasing international pressure to stem the deluge from its shores and deliver urgent humanitarian relief to thousands still trapped at sea.

On Friday the country's navy said it had carried out its first rescue of a migrant boat when scores of bare-chested men were found crammed into the hull of a wooden fishing vessel and taken to shore.

Myanmar officials say all 208 men are from Bangladesh and will soon be returned there. AFP wasn't able to independently verify where the migrants were from.

"We are giving humanitarian assistance to them. After that we will deport them back to the relevant country," Zaw Htay, director of the presidential office, told AFP on Saturday.

"We have made contact with Bangladeshi border officials on the

ground regarding the arrived persons," he added.

Bangladesh's border guard force said a team would travel to Myanmar shortly.

"Our commander will go himself. The entire procedure might take up to two or three days to complete," Major Abu Russell Siddiki, a spokesman at the Teknaf border post, told AFP.

A separate law enforcement source said Bangladesh wanted to make sure Myanmar did not send any Rohingya.

The rescue by the Myanmar navy comes as fears grow for migrants still stuck at sea at a time when the dry winter months are about to give way to the regional monsoon.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said finding and saving the lives of those migrants should be a "top priority".

Speaking during a visit to Hanoi, he called on regional nations to tackle the "root causes" of the current exodus at an upcoming conference in Thailand later this month.

"But when people are drifting on the sea, how we can search and rescue them and provide life saving humanitarian

assistance, that is a top priority at this time," he said.

The Rohingya face daily discrimination and a raft of restrictions. Many live in displacement camps after scores were killed in 2012 as violence flared between the community and local Buddhists -- an event that caused a spike in people trying to flee on boats.

Most migrants aim for Malaysia and Indonesia using dangerous and lucrative smuggling networks that criss-cross the region.

Over recent years, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshis have left their homes in what has become the largest regional sea migration since the end of the Vietnam War.

The smugglers largely went about their business unhindered until the crack down by Thailand on smuggling networks in the country's south, which caused many gangmasters to abandon their victims.

Other smugglers off the coast of Myanmar have held off making the crossing because of the crackdown, instead keeping their human cargo trapped on boats moored in the Bay of Bengal.

A trickle of would-be migrants have managed to return to Myanmar after relatives raised funds to buy them back from smugglers.

But many more are thought to be still stuck on boats, and aid workers have urged countries to rescue them before the region is lashed by heavy monsoon rains.

Myanmar has seen surging Buddhist nationalism in recent years and spates of violence targeting Muslim minorities have raised doubts over its much vaunted reforms after decades of harsh military rule.

Many comments posted Saturday by readers on a Myanmar government Facebook page announcing the recent rescue were vitriolic.

"Pity. Push them back," wrote one user.

"Myanmar doesn't want Kalars," wrote another using a racist term for Muslims in Myanmar.

Noble Peace Prize winning opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is yet to comment on the current crisis, a silence that observers attribute to fears over alienating a swathe of the electorate just months ahead of the polls.

Controversial population law in effect in Myanmar

AP, Yangon

Myanmar's president has signed off on a law requiring some mothers to space their children three years apart despite objections by a visiting senior US diplomat and rights activists, who worry it could be used not only to repress women, but also religious and ethnic minorities.

The Population Control Health Care Bill -- drafted under pressure from hard-line Buddhist monks with a staunchly anti-Muslim agenda -- was passed by parliamentarians last month.

President Thein Sein gave his stamp of approval on Tuesday, state-run media said Saturday, a day after US Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken warned during a face-to-face

meeting of the potential dangers.

As predominantly Buddhist Myanmar started moving from dictatorship to democracy four years ago, new-found freedoms of expression lifted the lid on deep-seated hatred for minority Muslims -- including Rohingya Muslims now arriving on Southeast Asian shores in crowded, rickety boats.

The population law gives regional authorities the power to implement birth-spacing guidelines in areas with high rates of population growth.

Though the government says the law is aimed at bringing down maternal and infant mortality rates, activists argue that it steps on women's reproductive rights and can be used to suppress the growth of marginalised groups.

Modi's Dhaka visit to bring 'positive announcements'

Says Indian state minister for home

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi would make certain "positive announcements" during his visit to Bangladesh next month.

Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju yesterday also said India was "positively" looking forward to the visit.

"He [Modi] would be making certain announcements, things that are positive. We are thinking in terms of a brighter future," Rijiju said without elaborating at the Sixth Bangladesh-India Friendship Dialogue organised at India Habitat Centre in New Delhi.

Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar, who also spoke at the dialogue, said there were "enormous possibilities" to expand bilateral ties and New Delhi looked for a "win-win" situation for both sides.

He expressed confidence that the prime minister's visit would bring a "new momentum" to the relationship between India and Bangladesh.

Responding to questions on the Teesta agreement, he said it was "an issue under discussion".

"In such cases, it's prudent to wait for the results. It's a relationship with enormous possibilities. Hopefully, we will see that grow," Jaishankar said during a panel discussion on India-Bangladesh relations.

The Teesta deal was set to be inked during the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh in 2011 but was postponed at the last minute due to opposition from West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

Jaishankar welcomed ratification of the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement by Indian Parliament even as he flagged concern over a "section" trying to create "suspicion" between the two countries.

Rijiju said Bangladesh has been providing full cooperation in tracking down fundamentalists and criminal elements.

"We have a favourable and cooperative government in Bangladesh. Whenever our agencies get in touch with theirs, we get absolute support, which is very encouraging," he said.

Heading nowhere

FROM PAGE 1

just 1.5 lakh. The rest was done through government channels, said passport officials.

IRIS was awarded three contracts last year for giving MRPs to expatriates in those countries but the company failed to express track the job even in the face of looming crisis.

Since March the government had been asking the company to speed up enrolling expatriates so that all the old passport holders in the countries could be given MRPs.

The old passports would be phased out on November 24, an International Civil Aviation Organisation set deadline. After the date, many countries may not accept old passports and Bangladeshi expatriates could lose jobs and face deportation.

Ministers and senior officials had held meetings with IRIS people and set enrolment targets, which the company failed to achieve.

The firm's slow pace in enrolling expatriates for MRPs made it clear that a large number of Bangladeshis living abroad would not have MRPs after the deadline.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took up the issue in February and engaged Principal Secretary to Prime Minister's Office Abul Kalam Azad.

Azad formed a taskforce comprising officials of home, foreign, LGRD and expatriate welfare ministries,

the Department of Immigration and Passport (DIP) and MRP project management to provide technical support to IRIS and expedite MRP issuance.

Considering the fate of the expatriates, whose foreign exchange is the backbone of the country's economy, the prime minister also formed an advisory committee headed by Expatriate Welfare Minister Khandker Mosharraf Hossain to monitor the overall progress of MRP processing.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali, State Minister for Home Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, and foreign, home, expatriate welfare, LGRD, and civil aviation secretaries were included in the committee as members.

Both the committee and the taskforce sat several times and asked IRIS officials for faster enrolment in the three countries.

As IRIS failed to perform, the advisory committee on March 19 set targets for enrolment but the company showed very poor progress.

The target was 9,000 a day in Saudi Arabia and 5,000 a day in Malaysia and the UAE each. IRIS could only do 600 to 900 a day in Saudi Arabia, about 125 in the UAE and just 70 a day in Malaysia.

The committee on April 9 set a one-month deadline for IRIS to fulfil the targets, threatening it with cancellation of its contracts and hefty fines.

Even then the company did not pick up the pace.

The deadline expired on May 8 but the advisory committee is yet to sit or decide on the IRIS and the MRP issue.

A frustrated Mosharraf told The Daily Star last Sunday, "I was made coordinator of the committee to see progress of the company's performance. I am no longer with it."

He said the foreign and home ministries would now look into the matter.

State Minister for Home Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, who had been defending IRIS despite its widespread irregularities and violation of contracts, refused to talk about IRIS.

When asked what his ministry would do with the company when it repeatedly failed to perform, he condemned The Daily Star for going after IRIS.

In November last year, he had told The Daily Star that nothing could be done without IRIS. The Daily Star had then run an in-depth report with facts and figures exposing the Malaysian company's poor performance, violation of contracts and irregularities, and that IRIS failure would put a large number of expatriates in trouble.

The taskforce had its last meeting at the PMO on May 7 and expressed frustration over IRIS not doing its job.

Foreign Secretary Shahidul

Haque, quoting ambassadors in the three countries, said the government could not depend on IRIS any more since the company chose inconvenient locations for setting up enrolment centres, deployed unprofessional employees, and allegedly overcharged the expatriates.

The principal secretary said IRIS did not even listen to directives of foreign ministry officials, which was sad. Yet, he had asked IRIS to come up with a detailed plan within 7 days on how to issue MRPs to all the expatriates before the deadline.

IRIS did not bother to deliver a plan either.

DIP's Director General NM Zeaul Alam had no clear answer when he was asked why the authorities could not be tough on a foreign company even after it had put the country in trouble.

Now the government has only one option, increase capacity of its missions and issue as much MRPs as possible for the expatriates.

Most members in the committee and the taskforce know about IRIS and the MRP issue but never talked about actions against the company.

"Some home ministry and MRP project management officials, who enjoy blessings from influential people in the government, defend IRIS for various benefits. They are the strength of the firm and no one speaks against it," said a foreign ministry official, seeking anonymity.

Three trampled to death by rampaging elephant

A CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

A circus elephant went berserk and trampled three people, including two women, to death in Mollahat upazila of Bagerhat yesterday.

The dead are Monwara Begum, 45, wife of Yaar Ali of Jatrapur village in Bagerhat Sadar upazila, Kusum Biswas, 61, wife of Jatindranath Biswas of Kahlapur village, and Mizanur Rahman Fakir, 45, of Basabari village in Mollahat upazila.

The male elephant broke his chains when it was tied to a bamboo pole in Gopalganj's Gunapara. It then entered Mollahat upazila around 5:30am, crossing the Madhumati river, said ANM Khairul Anam, officer-in-charge of Mollahat Police Station.

The elephant first stormed Garfa village and attacked Monwara, who had come to her daughter's house, leaving her critically injured. Monwara was rushed to Khulna Medical College Hospital where she died later, the police official said.

seven houses in the village.

It then went to nearby Kahlapur village and swooped on Kusum in her house, leaving her dead on the spot.

Later, the rampaging elephant entered Basabari village and crushed Mizanur to death in his house. It also tried to pull a tube well there.

Hearing the news, Mohammad Faruk, mahout of the elephant, rushed to the village and managed to calm it down with the help of locals.

Faruk also said one Motiar Rahman of Sreemangal in Moulvibazar is the owner of the elephant and his female companion. "Circus groups hire the elephants from Motiar."

Last week, for mating, the male elephant was taken to a circus group in Bagerhat's Fakirhat upazila where his female partner was kept.

On Friday, the female elephant was sent elsewhere.

The female elephant was being brought back to her male partner to tame it, the mahout added.



A circus elephant inside a bamboo grove in Bagerhat's Basabari village. The animal broke his chains in Gopalganj and crossed the Madhumati river to reach Bagerhat where it trampled three people to death yesterday. Inset, locals look on as the elephant roams inside the grove.

PHOTO: STAR

Lawyers meet Mojaheed in jail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Condemned war criminal Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed yesterday instructed his lawyers to raise some particular points before the Supreme Court during today's hearing on his appeal.

The defence had a 30-minute meeting with Mojaheed at Narayanganj District Jail that started at 10:30am yesterday but they refused to disclose the instructions they received.

Mojaheed hoped that the apex court would consider the arguments if his lawyers could place them properly, Shishir Manir, one of his lawyers told The Daily Star.

Mojaheed, secretary general of Jamaat-e-Islami, was mentally and physically well, Shishir added.

On July 17, 2013, the International Crimes Tribunal-2 found the Jamaat leader guilty of five out of seven charges brought against him and sentenced him to death.

According to the verdict, Mojaheed had led a "death squad" named Al-Badr that worked as an auxiliary force of the Pakistani army.