

VEHICLE MOVEMENT

India okays 4-nation agreement

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The Indian cabinet yesterday approved signing of a motor vehicles pact with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal on June 15, which will enable seamless transit of passenger and cargo vehicles among these nations.

The Bangladesh cabinet had approved the pact just a few days ago.

Following the nod, Road, Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari will visit Bhutan where the pact is scheduled to be signed by transport ministers of the participating countries.

"The Cabinet has approved signing of the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement for the Regulation of Passenger, Personal and Cargo Vehicular Traffic amongst BBIN.

"The agreement will be signed on 15th June at the BBIN Transport Minister's meeting in Thimphu, Bhutan," an official statement said after the meeting.

Signing of the BBIN pact will promote safe, economically efficient and environmentally sound road transport in the sub-region and will help each country in creating an institutional mechanism for regional integration, it said.

"BBIN countries will be benefited by mutual cross border movement of passenger and goods for overall economic development of the region. The people of the four countries will benefit through seamless movement of goods and passenger across borders," the statement said.

Each party will bear its own costs arising from implementation of this agreement, it added.

A meeting of the secretaries of transport of the four countries was organised by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highway in February 2015 to discuss and finalise the draft of the BBIN pact, which is similar to the Saarc Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) draft with minor changes.

Earlier, the Saarc MVA could not be signed during the Saarc Summit in Kathmandu in November, 2014 due to reservations of Pakistan. "The Saarc declaration at the Kathmandu Summit also encouraged member states to initiate regional and sub-regional measures to enhance connectivity," the statement said.

Accordingly, it was considered appropriate that a sub-regional BBIN pact may be pursued, it added.

Gen Belal

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ministry yesterday. He would also be promoted to the rank of general on that day, according to the gazette notification signed by Joint Secretary Md Abu Bakar Siddiq of the defence ministry.

Lt Gen Belal -- who has been working as the principal staff officer (PSO) of the Armed Forces Division (AFD) under the Prime Ministers' Office (PMO) since January 1, 2013 -- will replace Gen Iqbal Karim Bhuiyan. Gen Karim will retire as the army chief on June 25.

Meanwhile, Lt Gen Mainul Islam, now the chief of general staff (CGS), has been made the PSO of the AFD, according to sources in the army and the PMO.

Lt Gen Anwar Hussain, now the Quarter-Master General (QMG), will fill Gen Mainul's shoes and an officer of major general rank would be promoted to the rank of lieutenant general to take the QMG post, added the sources.

Among the top-ranking army officers, Lt Gen Mainul Islam is the senior most. But as he has only around eight months of service age, the government has chosen Lt Gen Belal, who is two-year junior to Mainul, to take the army's helm. Mainul will go into retirement on January 31 next year.

Born in December 1958, Lt Gen Belal was commissioned in Armoured Corps on June 18, 1978 from Bangladesh Military Academy. A "Sword of Honour" recipient for his outstanding performance in the military academy, Belal obtained his bachelor's degree from Dhaka University, master's in Defence Studies from National University and another master's in Philosophy from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). Currently, he is doing PhD in Regional Connectivity under the BUP.

In his 39-year career, Belal held different important positions in the army including the ADC to the president. A keen golfer, Belal is married to Shoma Huq and has a daughter and a son.

He is the elder brother of newly elected Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Annissul Huq.

A week ago, the government appointed Air Vice Marshal Abu Esrar as the air force chief. He takes office after incumbent air chief Air Marshal Mohammad Enamul Bari retires today.



River connectivity by this year

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Under the protocol, Kolkata-Guwahati/Pandu, Kolkata-Karimganj and Farakka-Kolkata routes have been proposed for river transit.

Shipping ministry officials said the transit routes would require around 52 lakh cubic metres of dredging for smooth vessel operation.

Planning Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal told The Daily Star yesterday that they would conduct a study to determine in a month the method of dredging and the amount of money required for it. The two countries would

dredge the river routes separately.

Shipping ministry officials said a Bangladesh-India Joint Technical Committee already conducted primary studies on various river routes and multi-modal corridors for identifying problems.

Dhaka would take up a project to find out the extent of dredging and the amount of money needed for it.

Once the two sides come up with details on the project's financing, they would submit a joint proposal to the World Bank for funds.

Delhi has conveyed to Dhaka that it

had talks with the WB, and the Washington-based lender was ready to finance.

The WB would provide one-third of the amount, and the two countries would bear two-thirds of the cost, said a shipping ministry official quoting Indian high-ups.

A planning ministry official said Dhaka would create a fund under which dredgers would be bought for Tk 2,000 crore.

Talking to this correspondent, SK Mahfuz Hamid, managing director of local shipping company Gulf Orient

Seaways, said Bangladesh's river routes are now capable of handling Indian transit cargos on a limited scale.

According to the PIWTT, Bangladeshi ships will be used for transit of 50 percent of Indian goods, while Indian ships will carry the rest.

Mahfuz said Bangladesh now has around 3,000 vessels that ply inland river routes. And 10 more ships would be commissioned by December.

At least 20 ships could be commissioned in the private sector a year if ship owners were given tax waiver and bank facilities, he added.

Women are sexually abused all the way

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took her by surprise by offering his hand in marriage.

"That had dimmed all my hopes. I was sensing something bad but not as worse as that," Afia said identifying the guard as a Rohingya.

The guard forced her to live with him there for seven months before disappearing all on a sudden, she told Chris Lewa, coordinator of The Arakan Project, an advocacy group which has been monitoring Rohingya refugee situation and maritime movements in Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia since 1999.

Describing Afia's ordeal to The Daily Star, Lewa said one of the smuggled families, who were on the same trafficking vessel as Aifa and had paid ransom for freedom, took Afia to Malaysia with them later on.

"When I met her at a camp in Malaysia last year, she was still looking for her would-be-groom," Lewa told The Daily Star.

Many believe the man was killed in the jungle, the coordinator added.

WOMEN MADE SEX SLAVES

Many Rohingyas who moved to Malaysia to flee persecution at home bring their daughters and sisters there for marriage, while many others pay the traffickers a hefty amount for bringing their would-be-wives by the sea.

Though risky, they consider the illegal boat voyage cheaper and afford-

able, Lewa said.

After weeks of perilous sea journey - packed below trawler decks in cramped conditions with limited food and water and very poor sanitation, many women end up falling victim to physical torture for ransom, gangrape and forced marriage.

Apart from torture for ransom, many Muslim Rohingya women were subject to gangrape by their captors, according to victims and rights activists.

"Every night, two to three young and pretty Rohingya women were taken out from the detention pens by the guards to a clandestine place," Nur Khaidha Abdul Shukur, a Rakhine victim from Maungdaw who passed through a trafficking camp in Thai border town of Padang Besar last year and is now staying in Alor Setar, Malaysia, told the Bernama news agency.

"They were gangraped by the guards," she said, adding that women sometimes were taken away by guards for several days to be used as sex slaves.

Two young women, who had been held at the transit camp for more than six months, became pregnant after gangrape, said Khaidha, who entered Malaysia illegally late last year after paying the smugglers a big amount for her release from the Thai camp.

The victims of such abuse were not allowed to talk among themselves and none of them risked beating by the guards by doing so, she added.

Her husband Nurul Amin Nobi, who managed to escape from a trafficking camp after 22 days at Wang Kelian in Malaysia last year, also spoke of similar crimes being committed at nearby camps on Malaysian side of the border.

"In the night, several of the guards used to go to the pens housing the women and take them to a nearby place," he said.

"We heard the shrieks and cries of the women because the place they raped them was very close to our pens," he said, adding that they could not see what was happening in the dark of the night.

Some of the women who failed to pay the ransom were taken somewhere else and they never returned, the Arakan Project coordinator said quoting the victims.

During a visit to the southern border of Thailand last month, this correspondent met Thai security officials who admitted to having heard of similar experiences from the victims.

Chris Lewa, however, said she did not meet any such Bangladeshi victims.

"The women being smuggled by the sea are mostly from Myanmar, most of them are Rohingyas. Many of them board the trawlers with their children."

ABUSE ON VESSELS TOO

Two Bangladeshi trafficking victims, whom the police arrested at a jungle

camp in Padang Besar, told The Daily Star that women were raped every night during their voyage in December, 2013.

The women victims, all of whom were from Rakhine and other parts of Myanmar, were kept at one corner of their modified fishing trawler. The traffickers used a thick plastic sheet to separate them from the male victims, they added.

"During the night, the brokers used to go there and [sexually] abuse them," said Nur Alam, an 18-year-old boy from Shariatpur who was duped to a boat by one of his neighbours with a false promise to take him to Malaysia.

Though the victims would protest and cry at the beginning of the voyage, they stopped later as the traffickers mounted torture on them in front of their children and threw some people into the sea for protesting, they said.

"All of us understood what was happening but could not protest due to torture and fear of being thrown into the sea," said Shahabuddin, another Bangladeshi survivor from the boat.

The ordeals of the Rohingyas and Bangladeshis came to light after discovery of mass graves in Songkhla on May 1. The Malaysian government on May 25 also announced to have discovered 139 similar graves in a series of 28 camps on the Malaysian side of the border.



An abandoned camp in a jungle close to the Thai border with Malaysia at Bukit Wang Burma in northern Malaysia where traffickers held up to 400 migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh at a time. Inset, a wooden cage found beside the camp. The would-be-groom of Afia was confined to a similar cage in a camp near the Thai border last year.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF A MALAYSIAN PHOTOJOURNALIST

ERRATUM

This photo published on page 2 in yesterday's issue of The Daily Star erroneously carried the caption of another photo used on the front page.

We apologise to our readers for the mistake and reprint the picture, which shows distinguished guests at a roundtable on "Sexual Harassment, Gender-Based Violence and the Role of Media" held at The Daily Star Centre on Tuesday.

Eileen O'Connor, US deputy assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia; Marcia Bernicat, US ambassador to Bangladesh; Senait Gebregziabher, country director of Plan International Bangladesh; Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, editor-in-chief and CEO of Boishakh Television; Prof Gitara Nasreen of Dhaka University; Khushi Kabir, coordinator of Nijera Kori; and Hamida Hossain of Ain o Salish Kendra were among the dignitaries present at the programme.

The event was jointly organised by the USAID's Protecting Human Rights Programme and the Women Journalists' Network of Bangladesh.

Facilitate unrestricted access for migrants

US urges Bangladesh, Myanmar

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The United States has urged Bangladesh and Myanmar to continue to facilitate unrestricted humanitarian access to address the situation of adrift migrants.

The US has also encouraged the two countries to work with international organisations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration, and to deal with these migrants in line with their international commitments.

"We also understand that the governments of Burma [Myanmar] and Bangladesh are working with appropriate international organisations to verify the identities of the migrants who have disembarked," said Jeff Rathke, director of the US State Department's press office.

He was replying to questions during the daily press briefing in Washington DC on June 9.

About the 150 migrants rescued by Myanmar Navy, who were repatriated to Bangladesh on Monday, Rathke said this was a result of cooperation between the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, on another question about the recent visit of Indian PM Narendra Modi to Dhaka, he said, "I don't really have a comment on the prime minister's visit to Bangladesh. Of course, we support good relations between the two countries, but I don't have any further comments to offer on that visit."

SME loan

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In 2013, the government recognised the hijras as the third gender to ensure their rights, enabling them to identify their gender in documents such as passports. In 2009, Bangladesh allowed hijras to vote for the first time.

There are at least 10,000 hijras in Bangladesh, according to official estimate.

The central bank also ordered banks to lend entrepreneurs belonging to the physically challenged group, marginalised women entrepreneurs and all indigenous groups, including the Rakhine community.

No condition

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held city polls in Dhaka and Chittagong, the PM, in a scripted reply, said it was the first time in Bangladesh's history that city corporation elections were held in such a free, fair, peaceful and neutral manner as the law enforcement agencies were active round-the-clock.

"Democratic process and local government have been strengthened through the city corporation elections," she said, adding, "The victory reflected the wish of people."

Staying neutral, the Election Commission conducted the city corporation polls, Hasina told the House.

On BNP's decision to boycott the election halfway into the voting, the PM said their only aim was to gain political mileage.

Pointing to various achievements in power sector, Hasina said her government had planned to import more electricity from neighbouring countries in future to meet the country's growing demand for power.

She also said her government had been conducting feasibility study on importing gas from Myanmar through pipeline.

"We hope we will be able to supply electricity to every household by