

Kerry hails US-Vietnam ties, urges progress on rights

AFP, Hanoi

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday hailed the transformation of relations with Vietnam 20 years after ties were established, but warned Hanoi's poor rights record stood in the way of deeper bonds between the former wartime foes.

Kerry, on the last leg of a trip through the Middle East and Asia, said progress on rights issues was key to boosting the partnership between the two countries, which fought a bitter decades-long war that ended in 1975.

"We have seen some positive steps on human rights in Vietnam over the past year," Kerry said after meeting Vietnam's Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, pointing to the release of several high-profile prisoners of conscience, some of whom now live in exile in the United States.

But he said there was "room for improvement", urging legal reforms to remove vaguely-worded provisions in the penal code that are frequently used to persecute domestic critics.

Minh responded that the communist country "respects and promotes" human rights, while it was willing to engage with the US to improve.

In a sign of warming US ties with Hanoi, last year Washington partially lifted a 40-year ban on arms sales to Vietnam.

The move came in the face of growing assertiveness by Beijing in the South China Sea where Hanoi is locked in a longstanding territorial dispute with China over island chains.

Yesterday, Minh asked the US to fully lift the embargo on lethal weapons sales, saying Vietnam "respected" its role in contributing to peace in the region.

22 highways

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Masjid-Baliadighi land port; Daulatdia-Faridpur (Rajbari intersection)-Magura-Jhenidah bypass-Jessore bypass-Khulna City bypass-Mongla; Tegoria intersection (Dhaka)-Mawa-Kawrakandi-Bhanga-Barisal-Patukhali; Mainamati (Comilla)-Brahmanbaria bypass-Sarail; Madanpur-Bhulta-Mirerbazar-Bogra-Kadda (Dhaka bypass); Elenga-Nalka-Hatikumrul; Bogra-Natore; Rangpur-Barobari-Kurigram; Hatikumrul-Banpara; Barobari-Lalmonirhat-Burimari; Nabinagar-EPZ-Chandra; Jessore-Magura; Jhenidah-Kushtia-Dashoria; Chashara intersection (Jessore)-Benapole; Bhanga-Faridpur bypass-Rajbari intersection; Bhanga-Bhatiapara-Mollahat-Fakirhat-Noapara; Bhatiapara-Kalna-Lohagara-Narail-Jessore.

Bodre Munir Ferdous, deputy commissioner of Noakhali; and Ashraf-ud-Doula, additional superintendent of police; were present.

PM to address

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(UNGA) opening on September 15. The 193 member states of the organisation have agreed to an ambitious agenda that features 17 new Sustainable Development Goals that aim to end poverty, promote prosperity and people's well-being while protecting the environment by 2030.

Hasina is scheduled to address the summit on September 26 and later join an annual high-level UN General Debate on September 28-October 6.

Sources at the Prime Minister's Office said Hasina was expected to depart for New York on September 25 which is likely to be the Eid-ul-Azha day.

However, another source said the prime minister may leave Dhaka a few more days before the summit and on her way, she could stay a couple of days in London for her medical check-up.

Contacted, a senior foreign ministry official said the departure date was yet to be finalised but it could be September 25.

According to the ministry officials, the upcoming summit will be one of the largest ever UN gatherings where more than 150 world leaders are expected to come and formally adopt the outcome of the new agenda.

On August 2, the 193 member states of the UN endorsed a "historic" roadmap to tackle poverty and hunger, promote well-being and safeguard the environment over the next 15 years.

On the sidelines of the UN summit, Hasina is expected to meet a number of world leaders and hold bilateral meetings and seminars on some "important" issues. The foreign ministry officials are working on the sidelines meetings, said sources.

After the summit, Hasina will join some important events of the UNGA General Debate and return home. Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali will then brief reporters about the events.

Fears mount for Croatian abducted by Egypt jihadists

AFP, Cairo

Fears mounted over the fate of a Croatian abducted in Egypt by Islamic State group militants who have threatened to execute him by the end of yesterday.

Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic said she would talk to her Egyptian counterpart President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi by telephone as the jihadist deadline approached.

"Be sure that we are really doing our best to solve this," she was quoted as saying by the state-run HINA news agency.

The unprecedented abduction in the North African country has rattled foreigners who flock to Egypt to work for multinational companies, while underscoring the jihadists' reach

despite a massive military campaign against them.

Although Egypt is fighting an Islamic State group insurgency in the sparsely populated Sinai Peninsula, it had been largely spared the horrific kidnappings conducted by the Islamic State group in Syria, Iraq and Libya.

The father of Tomislav Salopek, who works for the French geoscience company CGG, called on the kidnappers to release the 31-year-old father of two, as Croatian Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic said she was leaving for Cairo to follow the case.

"I am asking the people who hold my son to let him return to his family, because his motive to go to your homeland was exclusively to earn bread for his children.

UN, Amnesty Int'l

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statement.

They called for a prompt and thorough investigation into the recent murders of bloggers critical of extremism.

"It is vital to ensure the identification of those responsible for this and the previous horrendous crimes, as well as those who may have masterminded the attacks.

"The organised targeting of critical voices aims at promoting a culture of silence and fear, and affects the society as a whole."

The special rapporteurs said the Bangladeshi authorities must not only continue to strongly condemn these horrendous acts against freedom of expression, but should also ensure that their words are followed by more effective efforts to ensure greater accountability and prevent this kind of violence.

They urged the government to consider specific initiatives to prevent the recurrence of attacks against writers and activists. This should include not only the provision of particular physical protections to those who are potential targets for violence, but also open public debate challenging extremist views of all kinds.

Meanwhile, the UN resident coordinator in Bangladesh called upon the authorities to investigate and bring the perpetrators of this killing and all the previous ones to justice in a speedy manner.

"The police need to take concrete measures to protect citizens. Moreover, strong condemnation of these incidents from the all levels of society will be important to prevent further murders," Robert D Watkins said.

The Amnesty International (AI)

said the Bangladesh government must send a strong message that killings aimed at silencing dissenting voices are despicable and will not be tolerated.

"This spate of savage killings must end here. There is little doubt that these especially brutal killings are designed to sow fear and to have a chilling effect on free speech. This is unacceptable," said David Griffiths, AI's South Asia research director.

"The price for holding opinions and expressing them freely must not be death. The Bangladeshi authorities now have an urgent duty to make clear that no more attacks like this will be tolerated."

Griffiths said that thorough, effective, independent and impartial investigations must be carried out promptly to ensure all those responsible are brought to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty.

"How many more bloggers must be murdered before the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina acts decisively to stem the violence and impunity?" Asia Program Research Associate Sumit Galhotra of the New York-based CPJ said, following Niladri's killing.

"We call on the Hasina government to take urgent steps to bring the perpetrators of this barbaric murder to justice and protect all journalists under threat," he added.

Earlier in February this year, secular blogger Avijit Roy was killed and his wife seriously injured in a similar attack. A month later, another blogger named Oyasiqur Rahman was killed in the capital. Then in May, Ananta Bijoy Das, who wrote for a website promoting secularism and religious tolerance, was hacked to death in Sylhet.

Property of minority

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Swarupkathi upazila of Pirojpur. An influential woman lawmaker has grabbed land of Ramganj Mission and Ashram in Gaibandha and felled trees there, he added.

There have been reports that an influential minister has occupied 300 decimal of land and a house, worth several crore taka, of a Hindu landlord at Jhiltuli, Faridpur by forcing him to sign a Bainama (deed of purchasing properties). The minister even demolished the old temple and Ashram, said the BHCOP leader.

Rana claimed that almost all the endowed properties of religious minorities in Faridpur have been grabbed. "The local administration has occupied over 14,900 decimal and set up different establishments there."

He further complained that many religious minority people, including journalists, have been attacked, harassed, tortured, and implicated in false cases in Faridpur.

In Laxmipur, some local administration officials and ruling party leaders have been trying to grab 3,600 decimal in Dalal Bazar, he noted.

Apart from the Hindus, people from the Christian, Buddhist and indigenous communities are being subjected to torture and repression and their land has been grabbed in different districts, said Rana.

He urged the prime minister not to spare anyone who were involved in such illegal activities and demanded the government take administrative, legal and political measures against the alleged grabbers and torturers.

He also called for forming minority cells in all political parties and in the government to ensure security of religious minorities.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, he said they want Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina intervene in the issue to resolve the problems.

men is serious.

"If the allegation is proved to be true, it would be very sad. You [AL men] chant slogans claiming yourselves to be secular and progressive, but act like predators by taking away properties from religious minority people," he added.

Suranjit said the complaint has been ultimately made against the state and the government. "So Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is the last hope for the religious minorities and she will have to take the responsibility [for their wellbeing]."

BNP BLAMES IT ON AL
The BNP yesterday claimed that the country's religious minorities are tortured and repressed when the Awami League is in power.

"It is publicised that the religious minority people face repression during the rule of BNP. But it has been proved now that they are repressed and their properties are grabbed when the Awami League is in power," BNP International Affairs Secretary Asaduzzaman Ripon told a press conference at the party's Nayapaltan central office.

He suggested that the government have a separate ministry to protect the interests of the religious minorities. In this connection, he said India, being a secular country, has set up a separate ministry for its religious minorities.

Hefajat leader

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Substances Act with Khulshi Police Station. Izhar and his son Harun Bin Izhar were made the prime accused.

Two other cases, including one for murder, were also filed in connection with the blast incident.

On February 10 last year, Mohammad Lokman, sub-inspector of Khulshi Police Station and also investigating officer of the case, submitted the charge sheet in the case.

According to the charge sheet, in primary investigation, it was found that explosives were preserved, made and kept in the madrasa for conducting subversive activities and creating panic among the people.

Turkey freezes assets of Yemeni ex-president, rebel leaders

AFP, Ankara

Turkey has frozen the assets of officials from Yemen's former regime including ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh, along with Huthi rebel leaders, the official Anatolia news agency reported yesterday.

The move by Ankara followed UN Security Council sanctions on the same five men for threatening peace in the impoverished, conflict-torn country.

The decision, which was published in the Official Gazette having been endorsed by the cabinet, blacklists Saleh, his son Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh, and Huthi leaders Abdulmalik al-Huthi, Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim and Abd al-Khaliq al-Huthi, the agency said.

The sanctions freeze any assets, bank accounts and safe deposit boxes the five might have in Turkey and will be in place until February 26, 2016, Anatolia said.

North Korea

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imperialists" had "deprived Korea of even its standard time" by changing the clocks during occupation.

The entire Korean peninsula - then one country - was 8.5 hours ahead of GMT until Japan colonised it in 1910.

KCNA quoted officials as saying the decision to adopt Pyongyang Time reflected "the unshakeable faith and will of the service personnel and people on the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation".

South Korea said the move could cause some short-term inconvenience at the Kaesong industrial plant in North Korea, jointly run by the two Koreas.

"And in the longer term, there may be some fallout for efforts to unify standards and reduce differences between the two sides," Unification Ministry official Jeong Joon-Hee said. There is no international body that approves a country's change of time zone as countries decide for themselves.

In 2011, Samoa changed its time zone to the other side of the international dateline, losing one day, so as to make communication easier with neighbours Australia and New Zealand.

And North Korea is not the only country that has created its own unique time zone.

In 2007, Venezuela decided to turn its clocks back by half an hour as President Hugo Chavez wanted to have a "more fair distribution of the sunrise" to residents.

Venezuela is now the only country with a time zone 4.5 hours behind GMT.

India's 'road

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abandoned tar and gravel on roadsides. He collects the unclaimed material and uses it to fill potholes, at times spending his own pension money to do it.

Tilak, who calls his work 'Shramadaan' (offering physical help), doesn't confine himself to his neighborhood -- he patches up every pothole he can find in the city.

"After working for the South Central Railway for 35 years, I retired in October 2008 and spent some time off in 2009, also traveling to the US to meet my son," Tilak told the local media.

"In January 2010, I came back and took up a job as a consultant in a software agency." It was during the course of commuting to this job that Tilak found his calling.

"I was driving to my first day of office when I ended up splashing dirty mud water on school children after my car fell into a pothole on the road," he recalled.

"Then a few more accidents followed at various places." He kept explaining to the police that these accidents wouldn't have occurred if the roads had been smooth. But then he witnessed a major accident that changed everything.

"It was near Langer House in the Old City area and I had already seen an accident occur there four days ago," he said. "An RTC bus rammed an auto, crushing one person to death. I was horrified by what I saw and I realised that if someone had filled the pothole after the previous accident, a life could have been saved."

So Tilak decided to take charge of matters himself.

Initially, Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation officials tried to discourage Tilak, telling him they would take care of the potholes themselves. But when he refused to stop, they had no choice but to join in by providing him with resources and materials.

He also has a letter from the state's home minister, permitting him to carry on with fixing roads. Tilak hopes that with media attention, he can inspire a change in the attitude of the general public.

Alarming rise

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punished," he said, adding that perpetrators do not even get arrested in many instances.

Even if perpetrators are brought to trial, the lengthy legal process erodes public interest in the case, he said, adding, "Sometimes the charge sheet submitted by the police is so weak that criminals get out through the loopholes of law."

Citing Rajon's case in which some police officials were suspended, he said such departmental actions were not enough. "Punishment has to be visible and cases of violence against children should be brought under the speedy trial tribunal."

Expressing disappointment over the delayed submission of charge sheets in the cases of recent brutality against women and children, distinguished personalities and many national and international organisations urged the government to speed up trial of these

cases.

Unicef, the parliamentary standing committee on women and children affairs ministry and National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Chairman Mizanur Rahman, among others, expressed their concern over the delayed trials of the perpetrators who committed these crimes.

Speaking at a conference on Thursday, the NHRC chairman said that the sudden rise in the brutal killing of minors was a reflection of the existing culture of impunity and a break-down of the rule of law in the society.

Fair trial would bring back people's trust in the rule of law, he said.

However, State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Meher Afro Chumki said the incidents of repression against children and women are now affecting the people more as media are focusing on these issues.

DNCC moves to ease

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Thousands of patients, including many with critical accident injuries, visit the hospitals every day.

The DNCC also cancelled the markets at Uttara Azampur Government Primary School field, open space adjoining Banani Railway Station, open space adjoining the bypass of J Block of Baridhara, and open space adjoining Uttara Sector 11 and 13.

Traffic congestion and the environment of educational institutions and diplomatic zones were taken into consideration for the cancellation, said a DNCC official.

"We have received objections from different organisations including the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, and following that we cancelled the cattle markets in the areas this year," the

official, seeking not to be named.

Both the city corporations have invited bids. DNCC and DSCC will reveal the names of the bidders on August 10 and August 12 respectively.

Armanitola playground is dubbed the largest of the city's makeshift cattle markets but its space appeared to be too small for the number of sacrificial animals put on sale there. As a result, huge traffic congestion was created in the surrounding areas last year.

Asked, Chief Estate Office of DSCC Khalid Ahmed said they would ensure vehicular movement during the operation of the cattle market to prevent cattle blocking the busy road.

However, DSCC dropped the cattle market at Golapbagh.

Eid-ul-Azha will be celebrated in last week of September.

Malaysian firm

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"Illegal monetary demand of Shafi-Malay group from poor Bangladeshi [MRP] applicants are increasing day by day," said the report prepared by Bangladesh Navy Captain M Arshad Kabir, who had worked as a senior government official in Malaysia for three months to assist the MRP issuance project.

Submitting the report to different government departments, including the Department of Immigration and Passport (DIP) on July 21, he said the Malaysian company was exploiting the migrant workers in the name of enrolment.

The Daily Star has a copy of the report.

Shafi and his employees were in full control of the eight application receiving centres (ARCs). They were charging extra, between Malaysian Ringgit 35 and 50, equivalent to Tk 650 and Tk 2,950, just for the enrolment of migrant workers, the report shows.

The staff of the ARCs, especially in Klang, Ipoh and Malacca, were found involved in taking bribes from applicants.

The MRP applicants had to give ARCs staff RM 50 to 250 only for submitting the application, RM 35 to RM 150 for any corrections, RM 10 to 20 for finger prints, RM 20 for MRP delivery, and RM 50 for showing online visa. Migrants had to pay RM 400 to 500 for pending cases as well.

The applicants are supposed to pay a prescribed government fee of only \$18 or about Tk 1,400 for the MRP.

In each ARC, there was an assigned staff for collecting the illegal money and depositing it to a bank. At least 70 percent of the money went to top officials of Bitara, including Shafi, while the rest was shared among the lower-level officials, the report said.

It found that there had been no check and balance on money deposited to the government account.

Bitara had been failing to show progress in MRP enrolments as Shafi terminated many experienced employ-

ees and recruited inexperienced staff keeping the Department of Immigration and Passports (DIP) in the dark, the report said.

The Malaysian company was also accused of not cooperating with the government officials sent there to assist and supervise.

The report said that the ARCs were in inconvenient locations for the workers. The report also identified inadequate number of mobile teams, and interference by brokers for the failure of the company.

It recommended taking stern actions against the people involved in illegal money transactions and ensuring administrative authority of government officials in the ARCs.

Former expatriates' welfare and overseas employment minister Khandker Mosharraf Hossain, who visited Malaysia last June, also found evidence of irregularities and corruption by the company.

Director General of DIP NM Zeaul Alam, who had regularly received such complaints against IRIS and Bitara but had not taken any meaningful steps, said they asked the company to respond to the allegations made in the report.

He said action would be taken after getting the company's explanation.

When The Daily Star wanted to know when the company was asked for the explanation and the deadline for the company's answer, Mr. Alam said he did not remember the dates.

Contacted, MRP Project Director Brig Gen Masud Rezwana said, "It is not my duty to look after the outsourcing jobs abroad. I only oversee MRP project inside Bangladesh."

Around seven lakh Bangladeshis are working in different sectors in Malaysia. But only around 1.5 lakh migrants had received the MRP until July 30.

The rest still have the old passports, which would be unusable after November 24, when the ICAO deadline ends.

Truck bomb kills 15

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"The killed and wounded include women and children, and labourers of a nearby marble stone company are among the victims. The attack was intended to cause mass murder," he said.

Soldiers erected a security cordon around the military base close to Shah Shaheed, a largely middle-class civilian residential area with no major foreign presence.

The wounded were overwhelming city hospitals, officials said, with reports emerging of blood shortages and urgent appeals for donors circulating on social media.

The carnage comes a day after Taliban insurgents killed nine people in multiple attacks on police targets, including a truck bombing in the volatile eastern province of Logar.

The attacks highlight growing insecurity in the country amid a faltering peace process with the Taliban as Afghan forces face their first summer fighting season without full Nato support.

The Nato mission in Afghanistan condemned yesterday's bombing as a

"contemptible act of violence".

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told AFP he was "unaware" of the Kabul bombing. The militants are known to distance themselves from attacks that result in a large number of civilian casualties.

A UN report published Wednesday said civilian casualties in Afghanistan hit a record high in the first half of 2015.

The report said 1,592 civilians were killed, a six percent fall from last year, but the number of injured jumped four percent to 3,329.

The Taliban face growing internal divisions after Mullah Akhtar Mansour was announced as the new head of the insurgent movement last week.

The escalating violence demonstrates Mullah Mansour's attempt to boost his image among Taliban cadres and drive attention away from internal divisions over his leadership, observers say.

The Taliban have distanced themselves from the second round of talks that were scheduled for last week, but were cancelled after the announcement of Omar's death.