

No Hajj quota from next year

STAR REPORT

Saudi Hajj Minister Bandar Hajjar yesterday announced that there would be no quota system on any country for sending pilgrims from next year.

"Starting from next Hajj season, the number of pilgrims will increase to 5 million and then to 30 million in the coming five years following the completion of expansion work inside the Grand Mosque," Arab News reported, quoting the minister.

All Muslim countries, including Bangladesh, have been facing difficulties on sending hajj pilgrims for the last two years due to the quota system.

In the last two hajj seasons, around 15,000 Bangladeshi pilgrims could not go to Saudi Arabia to perform the holy ritual due to a 20 percent reduction in the quota system.

This year, the number stood at around 20,000.

The Bangladesh government as well as the Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh (Haab) requested the Saudi government to withdraw the quota system on several occasions.

The Saudi minister also laid emphasis on the establishment and operation of a unified electronic system for pilgrims coming from outside the Kingdom through which all tasks and functions linked with arrival procedures are executed and documented.

Hajj visas would be issued to any person only through the unified electronic system, he added.

On the coronavirus issue, the minister said the top priorities of the leadership of the Kingdom are the safety of pilgrims, and ensuring their return to their countries free of any health problems.

The health ministry has taken extensive measures to make sure all pilgrims leave the Kingdom free of any possible infection with the virus, he added.

Six routes to be fixed

FROM PAGE 1

The rally will begin from the eastern Indian state of Odisha and enter Bangladesh on November 28 after touching Nepal, Bhutan, Assam and Tripura, he said. It will then head towards Kolkata on November 30 and end there crossing Benapole border.

Meanwhile, the technical committees of the signatories held their first meeting in Dhaka last week when they discussed all the issues. They agreed that the route fees would be uniform and that the amount should not hamper the spirit of the sub-regional connectivity facilitated by the Asian Development Bank.

The protocol on the movement of passenger and private vehicles will be prepared by

October so that it can be signed in December or even before, Quader said, adding that the protocol dealing with cargo vehicles would also be finalised quickly.

A test operation of cargo vehicles across the borders will take place in October-November before reaching a consensus on the protocol, the minister said.

THE SIX ROUTES

- 1 Kolkata (India)-Petrapole/Benapole-Dhaka-Chittagong
- 2 Chittagong-Dhaka-Hatikamrul-Bogra-Rangpur-Burimari/Chengrabandha (India)-Shiliguri
- 3 Dhaka-Hatikamrul-Bogra-Rangpur-Burimari/Chengrabandha-Jaigaon (India/Phuentsholing (Bhutan)-Thimphu
- 4 Dhaka-Hatikamrul-Bogra-Rangpur-Banglabandha/Phulbari (India)-Panirkanti/Kakarvita (Nepal)-Kathmandu
- 5 Kolkata-Dhaka-Sarail-Sylhet-Tamabil/Dawki (India)-Shillong-Guwahati-Samdrup Jhonkar (Bhutan)
- 6 Khulna-Jessore-Benapole/Petrapole-Kolkata.

V for no VAT

FROM PAGE 1

Yesterday, they called off their demonstrations and returned to the campus on hearing the government decision from journalists, even before the official announcement by the ministry and the NBR.

The ministry said the government did not want to create obstacles in the educational institutions and cause public sufferings.

"Considering the issue from this angle, the government has decided to withdraw 7.5 percent VAT imposed on private universities, medical colleges and engineering colleges in the fiscal year 2015-16," said the press release, signed by finance ministry's Senior Information Officer Shahedur Rahman.

Termed it a victory, the students thanked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for understanding their fair demand. They also offered apologies to the city dwellers for the troubles caused by their street programmes.

"We are extremely happy that the prime minister accepted our demand.

We will go back to our classes," said Nowshin, a BBA student of Daffodil University.

The Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh also thanked the PM for lifting the VAT. In a statement, it urged students to return to classes.

Earlier in 2010, the government imposed a 4.5 percent VAT on tuition fees of private universities. The decision triggered a huge uproar and the students took to the streets in protest. Following days of demonstration, the government lifted the VAT.

YESTERDAY'S PROTEST, ATTACK
As planned, several thousand students occupied the streets at different parts of the city, including Rampura, Gulshan, Banani and Uttara, yesterday as they did on Thursday and Sunday to press home their demand.

They sat on the roads and chanted anti-VAT slogans. Traffic was disrupted as students choked the roads, causing sufferings to many.



A student treats a policeman to sweets in the city's Uttara area, celebrating the government decision to withdraw the 7.5 percent VAT on private universities.

PHOTO: BANGLAR CHOKH

Street agitation with a difference

FROM PAGE 1

demand of scrapping the 7.5 percent VAT imposed on them.

They neither set tyres on fire, nor did they throw a single stone or brickbat to any vehicle. Not a single windshield of a vehicle was smashed either.

They caused indescribable grief to commuters by blocking the key points and stalling the city. But they helped many people, who came across their protest spots pass through. The students were also seen helping vehicles and ambulances pass.

The peaceful nature of the protest drew the people's sympathy. Despite the sufferings, many people expressed support for their cause.

In the eyes of the law, their demonstration was unlawful. It is illegal to block traffic movements to stage demonstration on the streets under the speedy trial act.

Under this law, police were supposed to take actions against them to

keep traffic movements smooth. But they did not apply any force.

In a rare gesture of humanity, police members on duty on Sunday in Dhanmondi area even shared their drinking water with the agitating students.

The movement of the students was also different in other ways.

During the agitation, some students even offered flowers to on duty police and took selfies with them to post them on social media pages.

Just one incident took place on Wednesday, the first day of the agitation, when there was a clash between the students and the police in Rampura area. Students of only one university were on the streets that day.

Widespread student protests began Thursday and no untoward incident was reported since then.

In the past, street agitation always meant violence. Protestors resorted to violent means to press home their demands, causing damages to public

properties and paralysing economic activities. Sometimes they succeeded, sometimes they failed.

We have the fairly recent violent street agitations as example.

In the first three months of this year, the country had to go through violent street agitation waged by the BNP-led alliance to force the government to call for an early parliamentary election under a non-partisan administration.

More than 90 people were killed in the violence; most of them were burnt alive as arsonists set buses on fire or petrol bombed vehicles. Panic overshadowed daily life.

The unprecedented scale of violence has given the government all justifications to come down heavily on the opposition leaders and activists.

In the end, the agitation failed leaving many dead and wounded in its trail.

Lauding the students' peaceful

movement, Prof Emajuddin Ahmed, a pro-BNP intellectual, on Saturday said they have set an example before BNP that there is no need to attack anyone or setting fire to vehicles to wage a movement.

It seems the government could have resolved the crisis earlier. Yet Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina deserves praise for her government's restraint on dealing with the agitation and for withdrawing the VAT, thus reaching a peaceful resolution.

The students who left the streets yesterday with victory have set an example that peaceful street agitations can also bring results.

Barrister Shafayat Ullah, a Supreme Court lawyer and also a teacher of London College of Legal Studies (South) took no time to write a status in his Facebook page: "A successful ending of a united and peaceful movement by our next generation. Very Well done! There is hope in the Future."

Hasina wins Champions of the Earth award

FROM PAGE 1

impacts of climate change. Cyclones, floods and droughts have long been part of the country's history, but they have intensified in recent years.

Serving as the PM of Bangladesh, one of the world's least developed countries, Hasina has proved that investing in climate change is conducive to achieving social and economic development, says a release of Unep.

The Champions of the Earth award in the Policy Leadership category, which the PM will accept at a ceremony in New York on September 27, recognises Bangladesh's first-off-the-block initiatives under Hasina's government to prepare the ecologically fragile country for the challenges it faces from climate change.

Unep Executive Director Achim Steiner said, "Through a number of forward-looking policy initiatives and investments, Bangladesh has placed confronting the challenge of climate change at the core of its development. These initiatives, from climate change adaptation measures to ecosystem preservation legislation, mean that current and future generations of Bangladeshis are better prepared to address climate change risks and reverse the impacts of environmental degradation."

"Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has demonstrated leadership and vision in

both making climate change an issue of national priority and advocating for an ambitious global response. As an early adopter and advocate of climate change adaptation policy, she continues to be an example to follow as world leaders seek to take action on climate change as part of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris climate conference in December," he added.

The award cites the progressive Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan of 2009, which made Bangladesh the first developing country to frame such a coordinated action plan. Bangladesh is also the first country to set up its own Climate Change Trust Fund supported by nearly \$300 million of domestic resources from 2009-2012.

The government currently earmarks 6-7 per cent of its annual budget -- some \$1 billion -- on climate change adaptation, with only 25 per cent of this coming from international donors. A Climate Change Fiscal Framework is also in the works to enable the government to track the demand and supply of climate change funds. For the first time, climate change is no longer merely an additional demand, it is central to the country's development prospects, said the Unep statement.

In addition, under her leadership,

the Bangladesh Constitution was amended in 2011 to include a constitutional directive to the State to protect the environment and natural resources for current and future generations. Prioritised in the constitution along with wetlands and wildlife, the forestry policies initiative by the premier has provided a natural barrier from some extreme weather events and the country's forests cover has increased by almost 10 percent.

Moving beyond physical and capital investment in climate change adaptation, the government is implementing a wide range of measures to help citizens prepare for an increasingly unpredictable future. These include new health services dealing with waterborne diseases linked to increased floods, training community groups about early warning systems and promoting climate-friendly agricultural technologies.

As part of climate change mitigation, the government is giving high priority to clean and renewable energy, including one of the world's largest solar home energy systems, covering 10 percent of the off-grid population, and reducing emissions from brick-making, one of the largest sources of stationary emissions in the country.

In a major initiative to protect environment, human health and liveli-

hoods, legislation is being enacted to step up regulation of the coastal polluting from the ship-breaking industry that employs a huge workforce in hazardous conditions.

"As one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, Bangladesh understands the importance of addressing the impact of climate change. The country is already experiencing its detrimental effects, and it is often the poorest and marginalised who feel it most," said Robert Watkins, UN resident coordinator in Bangladesh.

"From 1990 to 2008 Bangladesh averaged annual losses of 1.8 percent of the country's GDP due to natural disasters, yet it is important to remember that addressing the impact of climate change is more than just a question of economics. High tides in coastal areas of the country are rising faster than the global average, which leads to loss of livelihoods and displacement.

"By 2050 it is estimated that one in every seven people in Bangladesh is likely to be displaced by climate change, and they are also likely to move to urban centres already burdened with meeting the needs of a dense population.

"I congratulate the government of Bangladesh for being proactive in

tackling climate change as a priority of the country. It is also a clarion call for the global community to take action today, and to realise that climate change is not a problem of the future, it is already happening in our lifetime," said Watkins.

ABOUT THE AWARD

The annual Champions of the Earth award is the highest environmental accolade that the United Nations can confer upon outstanding individuals and organisations. Previous laureates of this inclusive award range from leaders of nations to grassroots activists -- all visionaries whose leadership and actions drive the world ever closer to its aspirations of environmental sustainability and a life of dignity for all. To date, the Champions of the Earth has recognised 67 laureates in the categories of policy, science, business and civil society.

The other winners named so far are the National Geographic Society (Science and Innovation); Brazilian cosmetics firm Natura (Entrepreneurial Vision); and South Africa's Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit (Inspiration and Action). Other winners will be announced throughout September.

The awards will be handed out at a Gala Ceremony at the close of the Sustainable Development Goals summit, on September 27.

Private agencies

FROM PAGE 1

this system only 10,000 workers have so far been sent to Malaysia in the plantation sector.

Due to the G2G's slow pace, the two countries are working towards the G2G Plus to speed up recruitment, ministry officials said. The private recruitment system is likely to be called G2G Plus, they added.

Recruitment has been slow because Malaysia has yet to open other job sectors like construction or services to Bangladeshis.

Under the G2G Plus system, Malaysia will also open other job sectors like construction, manufacturing and services, ministry officials said.

Talking with The Daily Star about the modalities of G2G Plus, the minister said, "The details of sending workers under the G2G Plus system will be finalised after our discussion ends with the Malaysian delegation."

He said that now a worker spends only TK 36,000 under the G2G to work in the plantation sector in Malaysia, but he will have to spend around TK 60,000 under the new agreement.

The Malaysian delegation, led by its human resources ministry secretary general Saripuddin Bin Hj Kasim, yesterday also took part in a meeting of the Joint Working Committee where the Bangladesh side was led by expatriates' welfare ministry secretary Khandker Md Iftekhar Haider.