



Newly appointed Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Harsh Vardhan paid a courtesy call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office yesterday morning.

# Delhi to take ties with Dhaka to new height

New Indian envoy tells PM

UNB, Dhaka

Newly appointed Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Harsh Vardhan Shringla yesterday said New Delhi gives its highest priority to its relations with Dhaka and wants to carry forward the ties to a "new height".

The Indian envoy came up with the remark when he met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office here in the morning.

Shringla also referred to a recent meeting between Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Bangladesh State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam in New Delhi.

"India will provide all-out support to Sheikh Hasina's government," the Indian envoy quoted Sushma as saying.

After the meeting, PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim briefed reporters.

At the meeting, Hasina sought the support of neighbours to achieve her government's goal of establishing a poverty-free prosperous Bangladesh.

About the power and energy sector development, she put emphasis on expanding the regional cooperation between Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan in the field.

Noting that her government has made the seaports free for use by neighbours, premier said Saidpur

Airport could be used as a regional airport for further development.

Pointing to the Motor Vehicle Agreement among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN), Hasina said she has taken this initiative for boosting connectivity among the four nations.

In this connection, she reiterated that Bangladesh wants to revive the rail routes that were closed after the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war.

The Indian high commissioner highly appreciated Bangladesh's stunning development in the socio-economic field under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina over the last seven years.

Underlining the need for setting up more checkpoints along India-Bangladesh border, the envoy said the movement of people of both countries will get easier for it.

Mentioning that there is a scope for more investment in Bangladesh, Shringla said Indian companies are interested to make further investment in Bangladesh.

Referring to India's initiative for launching "Saarc Satellite", the envoy said Bangladesh could join the initiative.

PM's International Affairs Adviser Gowher Rizvi and PM's Principal Secretary Abul Kalam Azad were present at the meeting.

# This is no way to strengthen democracy

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government, (having earlier promised to ratify everything) suddenly several cases were filed against her. Then, when every government would want an accused to return to the country to face the charges, the government decided that she would not be allowed to come. Why and under what law and whose authority, we still don't know. In a most childish move all foreign airlines were asked not to take her on board, ignoring specific international laws that govern international travel. Then, just as suddenly she was allowed to return to a tumultuous welcome at the airport, which then resulted in cases against 5,000 unidentified attendees. (How these cases will be pursued only God knows).

Things were quiet for a while as the AL chief kept mum. She was allowed some movement but stopped whenever she would make a comment. In the latest instances of arbitrariness, Sheikh Hasina was allowed to visit the ailing Sabina Yasmin but Khaleda Zia was not.

In Khaleda Zia's case a comedy was enacted with her going abroad. The plan was to send her into exile and the bargaining was whether or not she will be allowed to take her two sons with her. We saw the drama of Koko -- being charged with extortion (same as Sheikh Hasina), arrested and then released within a day with the case still pending. The drama continued for days which later turned out to be a farce as the BNP chief did not even have a visa for any country willing to host her. She had to negotiate to visit her husband's grave and seek clearance every time she went anywhere. Again the question is why, and under what law her movements are curtailed.

We trust the chief of staff when he says that the Army is not involved in politics or forming any new party. But what do we do when we receive

reports from our correspondents that district administrators are making lists of so-called clean politicians and that many of them are being visited by the powers that be goading them to join the new so-called king's party? What do we do when senior leaders of both the BNP and the AL tell us of powerful visitors asking them to move against their party leaders or face corruption charges?

We would like to strongly suggest that this is no way to strengthen democracy. Just as 'command economy' failed so will 'command politics'. The core of democracy is people's right to choose their leaders and those who will represent them in the government. We accept that we made some bad choices in the past. We accept that our leaders, including Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, betrayed our trust in many cases and over many years. We also agree that we got tired and fed up with confrontational and destructive politics and that we all yearned for a change. But we never agreed to bargain our democracy for 'knights in shining armour' to save us from dire straits.

We repeat that we welcomed the emergency for the simple reason that the election that was looming before us was going to further destroy our democracy, which had been battered by years of partisan politics from both sides. We supported the caretaker government, and we still do, simply because we want to go back to democracy, albeit greatly strengthened and made free of corruption. But arresting leaders at whim and 'punishing' them for making critical comments is no way of doing that.

In reference to the economy our Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus had told an earlier government: "We do not need your help, just

remove the obstacles and let people do the rest." We say the same thing today about politics to the caretaker government and to the armed forces that are helping them. We don't need your help in doing politics. Just remove the obstacles and let people do the rest. Here obstacles means corruption, lack of appropriate laws, necessary oversight mechanism, independent judiciary, Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, Public Service Commission, depoliticised bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies.

Much of the above the government is doing, and creditably so. But the tragedy is that it is doing something more. It is attempting to manipulate our politics by trying to predetermine who will be and who will not be a part of its future. This is neither desirable nor doable and even if forced, not sustainable. Every leader possessing slightest bit of integrity will shy away from being a part of this process. Those who will be forced to participate in this process will lack credibility to command any respect and thus be unable to provide stability. And those who will volunteer to be part of this process, and there will be many as there has been in the past, will not be worth the paper their names will be written on.

If anybody expects to bring about a dynamic Bangladesh through such group of opportunists can only be termed as being totally devoid of any knowledge of history, especially of this part of the world, and specifically of Bangladesh.

The chief election commissioner's roadmap of Sunday had cleared the air considerably about the coming elections. But yesterday's arrest of Sheikh Hasina brought in some dark clouds over the election horizon.

Suspicion has been sown that though the process and mechanics of the coming election may be free and fair, through "command politics" those participating in it may be pre-selected and thereby predetermining the outcome. Simply put "command politics" will yield "command victors" and thus instead of elected government we'll have a puppet government.

We hope that the above nightmarish scenario will not happen. It is imperative that immediate and credible steps be taken to remove all suspicion about it. For a start we think Sheikh Hasina should be set free. Let all credible cases be brought against her and let her face the law and the courts and let the people judge her for what she is. Further, we need lifting of ban on indoor politics. This will allow the reformists and the old guards to fight in the open and give the public a chance to understand the issues and make their judgment. It is our firm belief that there is a groundswell of support for reforms in every aspect of our politics. The leaders who will oppose reforms will be rejected by the voters, if not by the party activists and supporters. But the reform process has to be open and free, and not manipulated.

We conclude by urging the army-backed caretaker government not to jeopardise the whole reform process and the considerable success that this government has achieved in fighting corruption and bringing some institutional reforms by wittingly or unwittingly becoming over-ambitious and taking more on their plate than they can digest. The fundamental mistake committed by past proponents of "command politics" was to underestimate the wisdom of our masses. We cannot afford a repeat of that mistake.

# Kids trapped in tobacco menace

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"Working in the field makes me very weak," says Ali's 12-year-old son Shariful, a student of class-VI. "Sometimes while working I vomit." Shariful complains tobacco farming makes it more difficult to be attentive in class.

Green tobacco sickness is a health condition caused by dermal absorption of nicotine while working in tobacco fields. Symptoms include weakness, headaches, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, abdominal cramps, breathing difficulties, diarrhoea and chills. The malady can result in blood pressure and heart rate fluctuations. Symptoms usually last for several hours.

Following rain or dewfall when leaves are wet, the risk is the greatest, and children, having no resistance to nicotine, unlike a seasoned smoker may, are especially vulnerable.

Using protective clothing and choosing not to enter the field of wet leaves can minimise risk, but many tobacco farmers are unaware of such measures. Most don't buy gloves; nor is it usual for the tobacco companies which encourage tobacco farming to supply them.

"Sometimes I work in the field every day," says nine-year-old Reshmi Akter, a student of class-IV in Aditmar upazila. "I can't stay there long." Akter describes symptoms of facial pain and fever from her tobacco field experience.

"I know it's harmful for health," says her mother Roksana Begum, 32. "Our 13-year-old son Nur Islam became seriously ill from the field work last year and we had to spend Tk 10,000 on treatment." Nonetheless she says her family is habituated with tobacco farming.

Other families are more cautious. "I won't allow my son to work full-time

in the tobacco field," says Jobeda Begum of Thakurer Malli village in sadar upazila. Her son Rony Islam studies in class I. "We know tobacco farming is hazardous and also harms the soil. Sometimes Rony helps, but it's not a permanent arrangement."

A secondary consequence for children is that they miss class, particularly in late April when leaves are harvested. The headmaster of Aditmar's Saptibari High School, Tayez Uddin, says the non-attendance of many students during the six months of the cultivating season is a scenario common to tobacco-growing villages.

Still, for impoverished farmers the crop is seen to bring benefits. "We get seeds, fertilisers and pesticides for free from tobacco companies," says Rony's father Motaleb Ali. "They provide money to build leaf processing structures. Tobacco farming makes our family solvent."

"I would stop growing tobacco if I got a fair price for other crops," says neighbour Javed Ali. He has cultivated tobacco on eight bighas of land this year and his son Rasel Islam, a student of class-IV, participates. "Rassel weeds and tends the tobacco," his father says, "He waters the plants and with his uncle and I, mixes the chemical fertilisers."

Exposure to fertiliser and pesticide chemicals are further health hazards encountered by the children of tobacco farming families. While many crops rely on similar products, according to the World Health Organisation "large and frequent applications of pesticides" are required to farm tobacco. In Lalmonirhat, tobacco companies provide among others the insecticide virtako, used to target stem borers locally known as "majra poka".

Agriculture officials do not recommend its use to farmers in general.

These chemicals not only reduce long term soil fertility but may pollute groundwater and waterways as well.

Agriculture extension department officials recorded a total of 11,500 hectares in Lalmonirhat devoted this year to tobacco cultivation. They suspect the actual size of tobacco cultivation may be double that.

"It's rapidly increasing," says agriculture officer Enamul Haque, "Farmers are lured by the tobacco companies. If the extra incentives offered were stopped, the popularity of tobacco must decrease."

His words are echoed in the views of tobacco farmers. "We tolerate the harm to our health," says Jolekha Begum of Tikitiki village in sadar upazila, "because of the good profits."

"If we didn't get facilities from tobacco companies," agrees neighbour Rasheda Begum, "we wouldn't grow it."

Lalmonirhat's deputy commissioner Md Habibur Rahman is concerned. "We are trying our level best to discourage tobacco farming," he says, "But our campaigns never yield good results because farmers are swayed by the monetary incentives of the tobacco companies. Without appropriate legislation, it's not possible to properly address the situation."

In the meantime, only a small number of farming families reach the decision to prioritise health and education. "I wasn't able to attend classes regularly and my parents were often sick," says Biplob Chandra Roy, 13, a student of class-VIII at Barabari High School in sadar upazila. "As a result," says his father Ranjit Roy, "We've decided we won't farm tobacco next year."

# The golden girls

FROM PAGE 1

time my target was to win gold in this event. I believed that I would win gold if I could take the lead from the beginning," said Mahfuza, who is the first female swimmer from Bangladesh to win a gold medal from the pool since the introduction of the games in 1984.

Earlier in the day, female weightlifter Fullapati Chakma won a silver medal in the 58kg category by lifting a total of 144kg -- 63kg in snatch and 81kg in clean and jerk. The 21-year-old weightlifter from Rangamati, who was not in the lime-light ahead of the games, hogged attention before Simanta's feat in afternoon.

However, last edition's gold medalist Hamdul Islam failed to win any medal in 77kg category after finishing fourth with a total lift of 262kg, 19 kilos less than bronze-medal winner Umair Rasol of Pakistan.

In men's swimming, Mahfuzur Rahman Sagar won two bronze medals -- first in 50m freestyle and later in 1500m freestyle.

Elsewhere, Bangladesh women's football team posted a 2-1 win over Sri Lanka after suffering a 0-3 defeat to Nepal in their opener in Shillong. Krishna Rani struck both goals for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh earned two gold medals, as many silver medals and five bronze medals yesterday, after having bagged one silver medal and eight bronze medals on the first day of the competition. The feats mean Bangladesh are in fourth position on the medal's tally.

# 3 judges promoted to Appellate Division

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Three High Court judges were promoted to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court yesterday, raising the number of the apex court's judge to nine.

The three are: Justice Mirza Hussain Haider, Justice Md Nizamul Huq, and Justice Mohammad Bazlur Rahman. They will be sworn in this morning, Abu Syed Diljar Hussain, acting registrar general of the SC, told The Daily Star.

He said Chief Justice Surendra

Kumar Sinha would administer the oath taking at the Judges' Lounge of the SC at 10:00am.

Earlier yesterday, the law ministry issued a gazette notification on the promotion of the judges after President Md Abdul Hamid promoted them, Law Secretary ASSM Zahurul Haque Dulal told this correspondent.

New judges were last appointed to the Appellate Division in March 2013, when four judges were promoted to the Appellate Division from the High Court.

# India to shelve investigation

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On the other hand, countervailing duties are imposed against subsidies and cash incentives given by exporting countries to make their products more competitive, but importing countries often believe that such duties are given to injure their industries.

Jute millers and exporters here have been denying the Indian millers' allegations against Bangladesh "dumping" its products. They have said Bangladesh's jute quality is high and it is sold at a higher price than that of India.

"We have made the DGAD of India understand that Bangladesh is an LDC (least developed country) can provide subsidy and cash incen-

tives against exports. Our subsidy and cash incentives, which are decreasing gradually, cannot injure Indian industries," said Monoj on the outcome of the meeting with the DGAD of India.

Despite being a developing country, he said, India gives 10 percent cash incentive against export of jute products while Bangladesh provides only 5 percent for jute yarn and 7.5 percent for other jute goods.

Monoj also brought another point to India's attention that as per WTO rules no country can launch investigations against countervailing and anti-dumping duties simultaneously. But India initiated the move simultaneously, he said.