

## RAMPAL POWER PLANT IMPACT

## Unesco team to visit Sundarbans

UNB, Dhaka

A high-profile Unesco delegation will visit the Sundarbans soon to assess the possible impacts of the proposed coal-based Rampal power plant on the world's largest mangrove forest.

"Unesco wants to send its team this month [February], but we've requested them to be here next month," Chief Conservator of Forests Yunus Ali told UNB.

He said the Unesco team is going to visit the Sundarbans as it is a Unesco World Heritage site. "The delegation will assess the potential impacts of the proposed Rampal power plant and see what remedial measures have been taken to address the possible impacts."

An official at Unesco Dhaka office said the delegation would visit Bangladesh in late February or early next month.

On December 9, 2014, there had been huge oil spill at the Shela River in the Sundarbans when an oil tanker carrying about 350,000 litres of furnace oil crashed in the river after colliding with a cargo vessel.

Yunus said the delegation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) will also examine whether there is any impact of the oil spill on the Sundarbans, a habitat to Bengal tigers and endangered Irrawaddy dolphins.

The mangrove forest is situated about 14 kilometres away from the proposed 1,320-megawatt coal-based power plant site. However, the peripheral area of the forest begins within

four kilometres from the power plant.

The project is a joint venture of Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and the National Thermal Power Corporation Limited of India under the name of Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company.

Environment experts warned that the power project would bring more harm to the country than good, destroying the World Heritage site, since the climate, topography, land use pattern, wetlands, floral and faunal diversity and quality of air and water in the Sundarbans will be affected due to the power plant.

"The Sundarbans will face a long-term impact. Physical growth of plants, their flowering and fruiting will be affected severely while the breeding capacity of birds and wildlife of the forest will be lost," said Prof Abdullah Harun Chowdhury, a professor of environmental science department at Khulna University.

According to the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) of the project, the Rampal power plant will produce 7.5 lakh tonnes of fly ash and 2 lakh tonnes of bottom ash per year. About 15 percent of the ash will be generated as a result of burning coal.

Citing an independent EIA, Prof Harun said the wind flow of the area indicates that the Sundarbans will be affected by the toxic gases and ashes of the coal-based power plant in different seasons. As the ashes contain sulphur, carbon dioxide, arsenic, mercury, lead, chromium, and cadmium, it will bring harm to the environment, he added.

## Delhi positive on Teesta

## Says Indian member of JRC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A leading Indian negotiator of the trans-boundary rivers yesterday said they would promptly respond to the signing of the much-awaited Teesta water-sharing agreement whenever Bangladesh proposes it to them.

A Bangladeshi negotiator, however, said the final draft of the treaty has been on the table for long.

"We are very positive on all the issues of Bangladesh," said Indian negotiator C Lal, a member of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission, when this paper approached him at a meeting in the capital.

Lal was leading a five-member delegation at the 62nd meeting of the Joint Committee on sharing of Ganges water at Farakka.

Only Bangladesh could tell when the issue should be discussed because they would propose it, said Lal, also the co-chairman of joint committee.

"We will respond immediately when they propose the time," he said.

However, Mofazzal Hossain, a member of Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission and co-chairman of the joint committee, said the Teesta treaty was finally drafted in 2010 and it was supposed to be signed by Dhaka and Delhi in early September 2011.

But at the eleventh hour, it was shelved in the face of opposition from West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, he said.

Mofazzal was leading a five-member Bangladesh delegation at the

Ganges meeting.

"There is nothing to propose afresh, we have nothing to propose new, everything is on the table," he said, adding, "It [the treaty] is just waiting to be signed by the two prime ministers."

Every time Bangladesh foreign secretary or foreign minister visit India and raise the Teesta treaty issue, the Indian counterparts say they are trying to win the consent of Mamata Banerjee.

The issue automatically comes up at any bilateral negotiation with India, said Mofazzal.

"It is often discussed on the sidelines but unofficially."

Mamata's last-minute U-turn on the issue caused a constraint on the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in signing the deal.

The Indian PM made a two-day visit to Dhaka in early September 2011 and was supposed to sign the water treaty, which is very crucial for Bangladesh.

Manmohan's visit to Bangladesh, first by an Indian prime minister in 12 years then, suffered a damper after the last-minute drama from Mamata Banerjee cast doubt over the signing of Teesta water-sharing treaty.

The deal that reportedly provided for 50-50 sharing of the river water met protests from Mamata who was so upset that she pulled out from the entourage of Manmohan.

Mamata reportedly agreed to share up to 33,000 cusecs of water, but the final draft mentions sharing of 50,000 cusecs, an arrangement she finds harmful to West Bengal state.

## Pakistan interfering in Bangladesh's internal affairs

## Says health minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Health and Family Welfare Minister Mohammad Nasim has said that Pakistan is shamelessly interfering in Bangladesh's internal affairs, overstepping the boundaries of diplomatic decency.

"We want to maintain relations with them, but not at the cost of our independence and sovereignty," said Nasim, also Awami League presidium member, at a joint meeting of Awami Jubo League at its central office on Bangabandhu Avenue in the capital yesterday.

The meeting was organised as part of preparations for a human-chain programme in the capital on Monday.

The AL-led 14-party alliance will form the human chain from Gabtoli to Jatrabari at 4:00pm on Monday to protest Pakistan's derogatory remarks on the 1971 Liberation War, its interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs and

BNP Chief Khaleda Zia's recent comment on the number of martyrs in 1971.

While addressing the meeting, the minister said, "The Daily Star editor admitted that he had made a mistake by publishing false news against Sheikh Hasina.

"... Thank you since you admitted to the mistake and apologised. But you should quit The Daily Star for your offence," said Nasim.

At a talk show on a private TV channel on February 3, The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam made an introspective comment about a lapse in his editorial judgement in publishing a few reports that the newspaper could not independently verify during the last caretaker government's tenure.

AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif, among others, spoke at the meeting chaired by Jubo League Chairman Omar Faruque



Workers giving a final touch to one side of the dual carriageway in Daudkandi area of Comilla. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: STAR

## Big boost for trade, travel

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from Chittagong at 10:00pm, I can easily reach Dhaka before dawn."

Workers were constructing a two-lane overpass at a level-crossing in Comilla. The job would be completed in eight to ten months, they said. Other adjacent two-lane overpasses would be completed by June.

"The first layer surfacing was completed a year ago while the second [final] layer has been done on about 100km so far," said Aftab Uddin Khan, project director of Dhaka-Chittagong highway 4-lane project, adding that they were working to complete the job by June.

Widening of this key highway was delayed by at least three years, initially due to a crisis of soil for the earthwork and then because of problems with demolishing illegal structures.

A crisis in importing stones from India last year added to the delays.

However, the poor performance of the Chinese contractor Sino Hydro was the main reason for the delay, Roads and

Highways Department officials said.

The company was under contract to widen 140km of the 192km highway but it had stopped the work complaining of losses. It resumed the work only after getting the river training job of the Padma Bridge project, according to sources.

DHAKA-MYMENSINGH

TRAVEL TIME CUT

The travel time has also gone down on Dhaka-Mymensingh highway even though some 11km in Bhaluka was yet to be converted to dual carriageway.

The expansion of the 87km road from Joydevpur to Mymensingh now allows a travel time of only one-and-half hours to Mymensingh after crossing the chaotic Joydevpur intersection.

Travelling down the highway last week, this reporter found the 12km stretch from Abdullahpur bridge to Joydevpur intersection was wide but chaotic, taking nearly an hour to cross.

However, it took only one hour and 45 minutes to reach Mymensingh, 87km away from Joydevpur intersec-

tion.

The contractor, Project Builders Ltd (PBL) and its partner China Major Bridge Engineering could not complete the widening of the 11km stretch, officials supervising the work said. The job was recently given to the army to complete.

Construction materials were piled up in the area and work will start soon, according to officials.

"We will try to complete the rest of the work by June," Project Director of Dhaka-Mymensingh 4-lane Project Hafizur Rahman told The Daily Star.

In spite of the wider roads coming into service soon, both highways have the perennial problems of reckless driving, parked vehicles on the road, roadside bazaars, plying of slow-moving three wheelers and jaywalking.

The traffic chaos at the entries and exits of the highways around the capital might also hinder people from getting the full benefit of the four-lane highways, engineers and experts said.

## EP worried over rights situation

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present at the press conference yesterday afternoon before the four-member delegation concluded its three-day Bangladesh visit and left the country.

On the state of press freedom in Bangladesh, Lambert said they had "some concerns" about what was happening to some newspaper editors in the country.

"I think it is fair to say that we have some concerns about what is happening to a number of editors of the newspapers."

Asked if her delegation had touched the issue during the meeting with the prime minister, Lambert replied in the negative.

She also said nothing related to elections had been discussed in the meeting either.

But "it is very clear that there is a need for some agreed mechanisms," Lambert said, adding that such a mechanism was required in Bangladesh to ensure participation of "many parties" in the elections.

She also made it clear that neither the European Union nor the European Parliament will make any recommendation on the polls-time administration.

"Neither the EP nor anybody else would be coming and saying that 'This is what you do'... We will not make any recommendation."

"It's something to be decided by the people of Bangladesh. It's your decision," Lambert added.

However, in a press statement distributed at the press conference, the EP said, "Concretely, the delegation expressed its desire for free and fair elections in 2019."

Though the election issue was not discussed with Hasina, the delegation discussed the issue of "an independent and strong" Election Commission in meetings with different other stakeholders, according to Lambert.

She said the EP delegation welcomed Hasina's commitment for further joint collaboration with the EU on better understanding the

causes of radicalisation internationally, "bearing in mind the important role Bangladesh plays in the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation)".

During the February 10-12 visit, the delegation met Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed, Law Minister Anisul Huq, Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali and State Minister for CHT Affairs Bir Bahadur Ushwe Singh.

It also had talks with BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, National Human Rights Commission Chairman Prof Mizanur Rahman, officials of Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, and representatives of different business and civil society platforms.

In the meetings, the EP delegation discussed several issues, including improvement of the workers' rights and safety in the garment sector, promotion of European investment in Bangladesh and boosting economic cooperation.

## Rohingya census begins in 6 dists

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citizens. International rights bodies see the Rohingya population as one of the most persecuted groups in history.

Last year, Myanmar did its first survey in 30 years, excluding the Rohingya population.

Currently, only 33,000 Rohingyas are registered in the two official refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. But the Planning Commission in its project proposal for the survey put the number of unregistered Rohingyas living in the region between three and five lakh.

On average, eight to ten Rohingyas enter Bangladesh from the neighboring country through porous border every day, the proposal paper says.

The survey will be done simultaneously in six districts -- Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Rangamati, Khagrachhari, Bandarban and Patuakhali -- where most Rohingya refugees are believed to be concentrated.

The survey is expected to be completed on February 17, said Emdadul Huq, joint director (Chittagong division) of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, which is doing the survey.

Then in late March, a census will begin based on the survey data. Following the census, the government

plans to create a database of the Rohingyas along with their photos and addresses where they lived in Myanmar.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is providing assistance in doing the survey and creating awareness among the Rohingya population to take part in it, the BBC Bangla reports.

Households under the survey will be listed in three categories -- M (Myanmar National), B (Bangladeshi), and X (in case of a Bangladeshi and a Rohingya are living together under any social bonds like marriage), said Emdadul.

With physical features very similar to those of Bangalees, Rohingyas can mix well with the Bangladeshi community. Unless they disclose their identities, it is hard to distinguish them from Bangalees. This is the reason why Bangladeshi households in the coastal region are also included in the survey, to see if any Rohingyas live in those houses temporarily or permanently.

Information of the Rohingyas living outside the areas will be collected through family members, relatives and friends, Emdadul added.

The six districts have been divided

into 243 zones. As many as 6,974 enumerators will collect information going door to door under 811 supervisors, said Mizanur Rahman, Barisal division's joint director of the BBS.

The Tk 21.55-crore project was approved in April last year, but it faced delay for various reasons, said Alamgir, the project director.

Holding of such a survey has been in the discussion for a while, but got momentum only after it emerged that overseas human trafficking through the Bay of Bengal boomed, riding on the Rohingya refugees.

International newspapers estimate there are 1.1 million Rohingyas in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Since 2012, about 140,000 Rohingyas have fled the country, mainly due to sectarian violence.

Entering into Bangladesh, some members of the community engage in criminal and even militant activities, according to media and police reports.

The intrusion of Rohingyas has become a common feature in the region since their first influx as refugees in 1978. The problem of illegal migration turned acute after the second influx in 1991-92.

(Our correspondents from Cox's Bazar and Chittagong contributed to this report.)

## Bangladeshi peacekeepers unhurt in Mali camp attack

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rebels attacked a camp of UN peacekeepers in Mali yesterday.

Four peacekeepers from Guinea were killed in the hour-long mortar attack on the camp in Kidal.

All Bangladeshi peacekeepers, however, are unhurt, according to a press release of the Inter Services Public Relations Directorate (ISPR).

The camp sustained significant damage in the attack, it said.

Bangladesh Army Chief General Abu Belal Muhammad Shafiqul Huq who is now in the West African country, would visit the camp today, the ISPR press release added.

The UN is trying to restore peace in Mali's north, which was overrun in 2012 by jihadists and ethnic Tuareg groups, reports BBC.

## Mahmoud

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Minister Riad al Malki, Special Adviser of Diplomatic Affairs Majdi al Khalidi, Special Economic Adviser Mustafa Abu al Rob, presidential spokesperson Nabil Abu Rodini and Ambassador of Palestine in Jordan Attallah Khairi.

State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid, Chief of Protocol Asad Alam Siam and other foreign ministry officials will be present.

Yousef SY Ramadan, chargé d'affaires of the Palestinian embassy in Dhaka, and all the Arab heads of missions in Dhaka will also be present to greet Abbas, the Palestinian embassy said in a press release yesterday.

The visiting delegation will have a meeting with Foreign Minister Mahmood Ali at the airport's VVIP Lounge. The issue of Palestine, particularly the most recent developments in Jerusalem, and some bilateral issues will be discussed at the meeting.

Based on the excellent relations between the two countries, the government of Palestine is always keen to provide the latest updates regarding the Palestinian situation, specially the condition of the holy city of Jerusalem, to the Bangladesh government, added the press release.

## Welcome

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our mundane life.

It does colour our mind too, making poets of us, making children step out on the streets with their mothers to take in the new air that tells of the triumph of life over death.

The Bangali psyche, poised as it always is for celebrating life, is at one with the vibrancy of Basanta. To celebrate Pehela Falgun, the first day of Basanta, hence, people will come out in their thousands on the streets today.

Men and women wearing the basanti (yellow) colour will swarm the main city points, especially the Dhaka University campus, to receive the arrival of Basanta through songs, poetry recitations and dance performances.

After a year of rising intolerance and thoughtless arrogance that left four of our freethinking writer-bloggers and a publisher killed, the Falgun wind, we hope, will blow more tenaciously in this spring to resume in us that spirit which buries hatred and breeds love and tolerance for all faiths.