

PM for unity of Muslim Ummah

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has stressed the need for the unity of the Muslim Ummah and its pursuit of the great Islamic values of justice and inclusion.

She suggested creation of an OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) mechanism or initiative to settle internal differences within the platform.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali delivered the speech yesterday on behalf of the PM who was scheduled to address the 13th OIC Summit Conference in Istanbul, Turkey, according to a message received in Dhaka.

Hasina referred to the call made by Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during the 2nd OIC Summit in 1974 for unity and solidarity within the Muslim Ummah.

She stressed developing an OIC humanitarian mechanism and OIC support for frontline battle against climate change impacts. She called for a collective action for eradication of poverty through implementation of OIC-2025 Programme of Action.

The PM also underscored the importance of implementation of OIC preferential and free trade arrangements on a fast-track basis.

The foreign minister took part in the

13th OIC Summit Conference as the leader of the Bangladesh delegation.

The conference started on Thursday in Istanbul with participation of around 30 heads of states, governments and their representatives and foreign ministers from over 20 countries.

Earlier on April 12-13, the Bangladesh foreign minister attended the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers Meeting.

The theme of the Summit Conference is "Unity and Solidarity for Justice and Peace". The leaders of the Islamic world gathered there to find common grounds on major issues. They stressed unity and solidarity to address challenges facing by the Ummah.

The OIC leaders under the new chairmanship of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan adopted several outcome documents of the Summit namely-Resolution on Palestine, OIC 2025; Programme of Action, Final Communique and the Istanbul Declaration.

Earlier on April 12, AH Mahmood Ali attended a meeting of the OIC Ministerial Contact Group on Rohingya Muslim Minority of Myanmar. He discussed within the group the future course of action and plan of engagement with the new government in Myanmar.



Elated indigenous girls sprinkle water to welcome the Bangla New Year at the traditional water festival, *Maitri Pani Barshan*, during the Sangrain Utsav of the Marma community in Bandarban yesterday afternoon. Sangrain is organised on the second day of the Bangla year.

PHOTO: SANJOY KUMAR BARUA

Faulty cylinders run risk of blast

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refilled in Nabinagar. Earlier on Monday, a CNG cylinder explosion at a gas pump in Chittagong hurt two people and ripped apart a car beyond recognition.

In October last year, at least 15 passengers of a bus were injured when the vehicle caught fire after the explosion of its CNG cylinder on Dhaka-Aricha highway in Savar. In September 2014, six people died after suffering severe burns in an explosion of a bus cylinder in Manikganj.

In Bangladesh, the use of CNG as automobile fuel started in the mid-1980s and became popular after 2001. Now there are around 3 lakh vehicles -- bus, truck, private car and, of course, autorickshaw -- that were converted into CNG-run from authorised conversion centres. Hundreds of thousands more are believed to have been converted from unauthorised workshops.

Shamsul Alam, chief inspector of the Department of Explosives, the licencing authority of the test centres, said some 2 lakh vehicles were converted into CNG-run vehicles until 2011.

For safety, gas cylinders should be tested every five years. But only 50,000 cylinders have so far been tested, he said.

"That means some 1.5 lakh vehicles are exposed to risk. The older they get, the greater risk the pose," he noted.

Across the country, there are 11 authorised test centres that submit the

test reports to his Department every month. Vehicles converted after 2011 do not require the test until the end of this year.

Sources said though the 11 centres are licenced to do the test, only seven to eight are in operation.

Shamsul said that around four years ago, they sent a proposal to the then communications ministry (now road transport and bridges ministry) that vehicle owners submit the cylinder-test report or the conversion report to the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) along with their vehicles' fitness certificates.

But the proposal was not accepted as the number of test centres was insufficient, he said, adding that as the issue was not incorporated in the law, car owners were having their cylinders examined at will or were using expired cylinders. "You cannot take action against them as there is no specific law."

Meanwhile, as the handful of testing centres in Dhaka remain swamped with work, vehicle owners have to wait for days to have their cylinders examined, said Mamun Hosen, a CNG-run vehicle owner.

"The testing seems quite a hassle for me. Not only does the test require three to four days, I have to take the heavy cylinder to the centre, leave it there and then get it back after a few days," he said.

Many also do not know that their cylinders need to be tested every five years.

Mohammad Ali Biswas, general manager (CNG) of Rupantarita Prakritik Gas Company Limited (RPGCL), the licencing authority of the CNG conversion centers, told The Daily Star that they sent a proposal, like that by the Department of Explosives, to the road transport and bridges ministry twice.

But the ministry did not accept it citing a lack of test centres. "But accidents will not wait because we don't have enough test centres," he added.

An automobile mechanic and garage owner Sentu Mollah said unauthorised conversion centres were sprouting across the capital as the demand for CNG conversion was rising.

"These conversion shops charge much less than the big, reputed workshops. But vehicle owners should be very careful while buying CNG equipment, especially cylinders, from these shops," he said.

The dates of manufacture and expiry and signs of rust and welding are some of the things to watch out, he said, adding that many cylinders were not specifically designed to contain CNG.

For conversion of private cars, authorised centres charge between Tk 65,000 and 75,000 a piece. The amount is between Tk 40,000 and 45,000 at unauthorised centres.

Manoranjan Bhakta, vice-president of Bangladesh CNG Filling Station and Conversion Owners Association, admitted that counterfeit cylinders, used by unauthorised conversion centres, were "very risky".

He said they had long been demanding the authorities concerned to take action against them in vain.

Both Shamsul and Mohammad Ali said the BRTA had a role to play in this regard.

But Md Nurul Islam, director (Engineering) of BRTA, said they issued fitness certificates of vehicles in line with the Motor Vehicle Ordinance 1983 and Motor Vehicle Rule 1984.

"Since CNG-run vehicles were not around when the Ordinance and the Rule were formulated, these have no mention of CNG," he said, adding that, they could not deal the issues related to CNG.

But talks to amend the law are underway, he said.

Nurul said the RPGCL was responsible for dealing with matters concerning CNG.

However, Mohammad Ali of RPGCL said they were empowered only to give licence to CNG conversion centres and filling stations and to oversee whether these stations and centres were following the government guidelines.

Under its scope of work, the RPGCL had nothing to do with cylinder tests or unauthorised centres, he added.

2 killed as car's CNG cylinder explodes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two people were killed and four others injured when the CNG cylinder of a private car exploded at a refuelling station in Nabinagar on the outskirts of the city on Thursday afternoon.

The victims were identified as Sajal Mia, 28, driver of the car, and Shamim Hossain, 27, a staff of the Delta CNG Filling Station, Officer-in-Charge Mohsinul Quadir of Ashulia Police Station told The Daily Star.

Both the victims hailed from Manikganj.

"The incident occurred around 4:00pm when the car was being refuelled at the gas station. Shamim, who was operating the fuel dispenser, died

on the spot while Sajal died on the way to a hospital in Dhaka," said the OC.

The car was ripped apart by the explosion. No case was filed till yesterday evening, he added.

Shamsul Alam, chief inspector of the Department of Explosives, said they were investigating the incident and preliminary findings suggest the CNG cylinder was "defective."

"However, the exact cause of the explosion can be known after the investigation," he added.

Shamim left behind his wife and a two-and-a-half-year-old son, said Shamim's brother Hashem Mahmud.

"Now, his family has become helpless. The filling station must take care of his family."

Govt sometimes failed

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government pressure.

"For example, independent journalists alleged that intelligence services influenced media outlets in part by withholding financially important government advertising and pressing private companies to withhold their advertising as well."

The report says "authorities" instructed a Bangladeshi cell-phone carrier and other corporations not to advertise in "two leading newspapers".

Asked to comment, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal told The Daily Star that the report on Bangladesh was "not based on facts". But he declined to elaborate.

CONTROL OVER SECURITY FORCES
The US report claims the Bangladesh government has "failed at times to maintain effective control over security forces."

The government has mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption within the security forces. However, these mechanisms were not regularly employed, it continues.

"The government took steps to improve police professionalism, discipline, training and responsiveness and to reduce corruption. Police basic training continued to incorporate instruction on the appropriate use of force as part of efforts to implement community-based policing.

"Despite such efforts, security forces, including the RAB, continued to commit abuses with impunity. Plaintiffs were reluctant to accuse police in criminal cases due to lengthy trial procedures and fear of retribution. Reluctance to bring charges against police also perpetuated a climate of impunity."

Describing extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances and killing of secular bloggers as the "most significant human rights problem in Bangladesh", it says the government took "limited measures" to investigate and prosecute cases of abuse and killing by security forces.

The report identifies murder of others by groups espousing extremist views, early and forced marriage and gender-based violence, and poor working conditions and labour rights as serious human rights problems in Bangladesh.

Other human rights problems include torture and other abuse by security forces, arbitrary arrests and detentions, "weak judicial capacity and independence", and lengthy pre-trial detentions, according to the executive summary of the report's Bangladesh part.

"Weak regard for the rule of law not only enabled individuals, including government officials, to commit human rights violations with impunity but also prevented citizens from claiming their rights."

Some nongovernmental organisa-

tions (NGOs) faced continued legal and informal restrictions on their activities, the report adds.

"Women and girls suffered from unequal treatment. Many children were compelled to work, primarily in the informal sector, due to either economic necessity or, in some instances, trafficking."

Instances of societal violence against religious and ethnic minorities persisted, although many government and civil society leaders claimed these acts had political or economic motivations and should not be attributed wholly to religious beliefs or affiliations.

Discrimination against persons based on their sexual orientation continued, says the US yearly report.

The report observes a substantial backlog of cases hindered the court system and "the granting of extended continuances effectively prevented many defendants from obtaining fair trials due to witness tampering, victim intimidation, and missing evidence".

INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

The indigenous people from the Chittagong Hill Tracts were unable to participate effectively in decisions affecting their land due to disagreements regarding the structure and policies of the land commission, the US report says.

"Strict security measures prevented some indigenous individuals and activists from combating discrimination.

"Indigenous persons also suffered from societal violence, including rape and killing. This violence was sometimes associated with land grabbing."

'GLOBAL GOVERNANCE CRISIS'

The annual human rights report covers internationally recognised civil, political, and worker rights, reflecting those set forth in the universal declaration of human rights and international agreements.

"The 2015 edition of the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices points to a global governance crisis," Secretary Kerry said in a statement issued along with the report.

"In every part of the world, we see an accelerating trend by both state and non-state actors to close the space for civil society, to stifle media and Internet freedom, to marginalise opposition voices, and in the most extreme cases, to kill people or drive them from their homes."

The US is opposed to the use of torture in any form at any time by any government or non-state actor, he stated.

"The contents of this report renew our commitment to promoting and protecting universal human rights, to supporting and defending civil society in its peaceful efforts to hold governments accountable, and to working with our partners to advance peace, development, human rights, and democracy."

In colour, in festivity

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and attired in traditional dresses, tens of thousands of people from all strata of society poured into the streets and thronged different popular and historic spots in the capital and elsewhere to welcome the Bangla New Year, 1423.

Colourful rallies, musical programmes, fairs and cake festivals added colour to the biggest carnival of the Bangladeshis.

Women in white sarees and men in panjabees gathered at *Baishakhi Melas* (fairs) that showcase various handicrafts and relics.

Like every year, the biggest venue for the celebration was set at Ramna Batamul, where programmes started with a Chhayanaut performance of Rabindranath Tagore's song "Esho hey Baishakh..." after sunrise.

Chhayanaut, a cultural organisation, has been organising the event for over the last three decades. It made a

huge stage for the trademark programme that was enjoyed by thousands as the artistes sang songs and recited poems.

Security measures were tightened in and around the Ramna Park and the DU campus.

Another main attraction of the celebration was the decorated procession Mangal Shobhajatra, organised by the Faculty of Fine Arts of DU, brought out from the faculty premises around 9:00 in the morning.

The procession featuring giant replicas of bird, tortoise, rabbit, tiger, owl, elephant and huge colourful masks symbolises triumph of good over evil.

Thousands of people joined the event dancing along the beats of traditional musical instruments.

Jagannath University also brought out a Mangal Shobhajatra procession which encircled the university's Shahid Minar premises, Raysaheb

Bazar, Tati Bazar intersection and Bangshal area of old Dhaka.

The Pahela Baishakh celebration was eventful on the DU campus, despite various security restrictions imposed on it. The entire area became festive with colourful masks and the sound of traditional musical instruments like *Dhol*, *Dugdugi*, and whistles.

A grand concert participated by Nagar Baul James, Mila, Shironamhin and other bands was held at the Mal Chatter in the afternoon.

All the dormitories of the university served special food to the students. Many organisations, including Blood Donors' Organisation Badhan and Dhaka University Journalists Association, organised special programmes on the campus where free *Panta Ilish* (hilsa with rice soaked in water) was served.

The crowd on the campus, however, was thinner than that of the previous

years as many city dwellers got a three-day holiday and went to their village homes to celebrate the Bangla New Year.

Ayesha Akhter, who went to the DU campus with her family, said, "We enjoyed a lot this year as there was no vuvuzela and felt safer due to the presence of the members of security forces."

This year, the government banned wearing masks and using vuvuzela, which creates a high-pitched unpleasant sound, during Pahela Baishakh celebrations on security grounds.

Restrictions were also imposed on carrying matches, lighters and handbags over similar reasons. The government also asked all to complete all the programmes on the day by 5:00pm.

The steps were taken after a group of rowdy men sexually assaulted women on the DU campus on Pahela Baishakh last year.

No-hilsa campaign worked well

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Several Facebook posts said the practice of having hilsa and *panta bhat* has no root in a thousand years of Bengali tradition. Some others voiced worries about the future of the national fish, saying over-fishing during its spawning season may soon push it to the brink of extinction.

Two ministers -- Cultural Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Noor and State Minister for Fisheries and Livestock Narayan Chandra Chanda -- and a few government officials urged people to drop hilsa from their Baishakh menu.

Even Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina struck hilsa off the Baishakh menu at her official residence, Gono Bhavan.

These calls seem to be paying off. The sale of hilsa declined as many people refrained from buying hilsa.

Shamim Mia, a fish retailer at

Shewrapara kitchen market, said he incurred loss for the first time in 12 years.

"The sale of hilsa suddenly plummeted the day before Pahela Baishakh. There were only a handful of customers," he told this correspondent.

Shamim bought two maunds of hilsa, kept at cold storage, ahead of Pahela Baishakh but could sell only half of it till yesterday afternoon.

The trader said he had bought hilsa weighing between 450 and 500 grams from a wholesaler for Tk 350 each on average.

He sold those for Tk 650-700 each three days before the festival, but failed to get customers even after reducing the price to Tk 300 yesterday.

"We always made some extra money on the occasion of Pahela Baishakh. But this year, traders like me had to suffer

losses," he said.

He, however, said the wholesalers made a huge profit as they had sold their stocks before the downward trend hit the fish trade.

Sumaiya Rahman, a resident of Mohammadpur, said, they didn't buy hilsa on Pahela Baishakh, but it didn't spoil the celebration.

"We had *panta bhat* with ruhi fish and bharta in the morning. Khichuri, chicken curry and egg were on the lunch menu," she said.

Rajib Ahmed, a resident of Dhanmondi, said they had different kinds of local specialties on Baishakh morning. "We celebrated Baishakh with much fanfare. We didn't have hilsa and it was fine."

At Karwan Bazar, traders were selling a hilsa weighing around one kg for Tk 800-

1,000 yesterday. Three days ago, it was sold for Tk 2,000-2,500.

"Today, I couldn't get any customer willing to buy this fish for even Tk 1,000," said Nasir, a trader.

Another trader, Shukkur Ali, said the number of hilsa buyers fell drastically the day before Pahela Baishakh.

"Now, we have to sell the fish at lower prices. We cannot preserve the fish with ice for long because it had been kept at cold storage for several months."

The trader feared he may have to sell the fish at prices far lower than the present ones.

Shukkur, who sells fish at Karwan Bazar for more than two decades, attributed the poor sale of hilsa to the campaigns.

He said some organisations buy hilsa from him before Pahela Baishakh, but this year most of them didn't.