

PM's Meal Biman catering staff suspended over negligence

UNB, Dhaka

An assistant manager of Biman Flight Catering Centre (BFCC), caterer of national flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines, has been suspended over neglect of serving meal to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her flight to Austria on Monday.

Biman Managing Director Mosaddique Ahmed said the authorities suspended Nurul Mamin Miah of BFCC for his "negligence in relation to food served to the prime minister".

Earlier, the Biman authorities formed a probe body, led by its Deputy Managing Director Masud Reza, to look into the matter.

The PM left Dhaka for Vienna, Austria on Monday morning to attend a conference of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and hold a bilateral meeting with the Federal Chancellor of Austria Christian Kern.

Tahmima wins O Henry Award

TIMES OF INDIA

Author Tahmima Anam has been awarded The O Henry Award for her short story "Garments".

The O Henry Award, first awarded in 1918, accolades American and Canadian short stories of exceptional merit. The names of the 99th O. Henry Award winners were announced on May 26, and a group of 20 writers, including Tahmina, have been credited for their outstanding literary oeuvre.

Tahmima, daughter of Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, writes from London and has been the recipient of the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize along with other acclamations.

This year's winners include writer of Indian origin Shruti Swami, Indian-American nuclear radiologist Amit Majumdar, and Jai Chakrabarti, who is a Public Space Emerging Writer's Fellow.

Edited by writer Laura Furman, and judged by authors Elizabeth McCracken, Brad Watson, and David Bradley, the 2017 O. Henry Prize Stories anthology will be published by Anchor Books in September this year.

GRAFT TRIAL

Spanish PM to testify in court

AFP, Madrid

Spain's High Court yesterday called on Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to appear as a witness in a major graft trial involving members of his conservative Popular Party.

Rajoy had asked to testify by video conference but the court ruled he must appear in person to answer questions.

He will testify at a court in San Fernando de Henares near Madrid on July 26.



People returning home from a cyclone shelter in Samitypara of Cox's Bazar after Cyclone Mora crossed the coastal district. **Top right**, the corrugated iron roof of a club was blown about 50 metres away by the storm. **Bottom right**, a man, not in picture, returns home from a cyclone shelter with his belongings on a rickshaw van. His goats and other goods are protected with a plastic sheet. The photos were taken around noon yesterday.



PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

7 die as Cyclone Mora crosses coastal area

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Hazera Begum, 40, and Mahima Akhter, 13, died when trees fell on them in Rangamati sadar around 11:30am, our Rangamati correspondent reports quoting district Civil Surgeon Shaheed Talukder.

In Bandarban, farmer Casing Thoai Marma, 40, died when a tree fell on him in Lama upazila, reports our correspondent there quoting locals.

In Moheshkhali upazila, around 2,000 houses were damaged in Dhalghata union and around 700 houses in Kutubjong union. Two villages were inundated in Dhalghata, said Assistant Commissioner (Land) Bibhishan Kanti Chakma, who was the acting UNO.

In Cox's Bazar sadar, around 750 to

800 houses were damaged and 15,000 to 20,000 trees fell. Power infrastructure was badly damaged too, said UNO Nazrul Islam.

"I was staying home to look after my house as the storm did not seem strong. But around 9:00am, the tin roof of my neighbour's house blew away and landed 200 feet away in a field," Abdun Nur of Samitir Hat area of Cox's Bazar told The Daily Star.

Cox's Bazar DC Hossain said around 20,000 houses were damaged by the storm. More accurate estimate on damage would be known after two days. The district has decided to distribute 110 tonnes of rice, Tk 9 lakh and other relief materials to the affected in its eight upazilas.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia in a

statement yesterday alleged that the government had failed to mobilise relief work to a mentionable level. She demanded that the government take immediate measures to send relief goods to the affected people and urged the affluent section of society to extend their helping hands.

Power supply to Chittagong and the hill tract regions -- Khagrachhari, Rangamati, Bandarban, and Cox's Bazar -- was out since morning, said Md Moniruzzaman, senior assistant public relation officer of Power Development Board (south).

Barisal and Khulna regions experienced almost no affect of the cyclone, apart from some light rain and breeze.

Even the island district of Bhola was not affected by any storm surges, said

Sahabuddin Mia, deputy director of Cyclone Preparatory Programme (CPP) in Bhola.

"OVERZEALOUS SIGNALING?" Even though the Met office issued a "great danger signal", the cyclone was not as strong. This might encourage people of the coasts not to trust future signals, said locals.

In a char of Cox's Bazar with 14,000 inhabitants, only 130 went to the cyclone shelter as the locals did not want to believe that it would be a strong cyclone.

"This time locals were not convinced that it would be a big cyclone when the met office issued great danger signal 10," said Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, executive director of Coast Trust, an NGO.

Most stayed home and observed the weather.

People in general do not want to go to cyclone shelters. And if signals do not match the reality, more would start not to trust cautionary signals, locals said.

When asked if the Met office issued a great danger signal for a weak storm, Shamsuddin Ahmed, director Dhaka Met office, said, "Our forecast was based on satellite image and analysing the track of the cyclone. There is no scope of guessing in our work."

According to the met office, "great danger signal 10" means, "The port will experience severe weather from a storm of great intensity (wind

speed of 89 kms/hour or more) that is expected to cross over or near the port."

Our correspondents in Chittagong, Barisal, and Rangamati contributed to this report.

Court frames charges

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conspiracy behind the razing of the mosque.

"It was an open movement... there was no conspiracy," she told reporters.

A lower court had dropped the charges brought by India's Central Bureau of Investigation, but the Supreme Court last month ruled they should be tried.

On December 6, 1992, karsevaks of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) demolished Babri Masjid, a centuries-old Islamic structure in Ayodhya. The incident triggered communal riots across the country, claiming lives of over 3,000 people.

Many Hindus believe the mosque was only built after the destruction of a temple that marks the birthplace of their god Ram, and it remains hugely divisive.

The site of the mosque was disputed as many Hindus believed, and continue to believe now, that it is the birthplace of Lord Ram.

Advani, along with others, was booked by the CBI for allegedly



Uma Bharti

hatching a criminal conspiracy to demolish the mosque, which led to riots. However, they were later discharged by the Allahabad High Court.

The revival of the charges against Advani, considered to be one of the front-runners to succeed Pranab Mukherjee as the next Indian president, threatens to dent his chances, according to Indian daily The Financial Express.

Some media reports had earlier claimed that Modi and BJP Chief Amit Shah proposed Advani's name for India's top post during a party meet at Somnath on March 8.

Some BJP leaders, including Bharti, want a temple built on the ruins of the razed mosque -- an idea that horrifies Uttar Pradesh's significant Muslim minority.

The Hindu-right party won Uttar Pradesh in a landslide election in March, and appointed firebrand priest Yogi Adityanath as head of the state.

Reap benefits of peaceful

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Hasina also called for stepping up efforts by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to assist the member states, particularly the LDCs and developing countries, to implement the SDGs.

The PM greeted IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano for his leadership and the agency for its dedicated efforts in promoting peaceful use of nuclear energy under its motto "Atoms for Peace and Development" in the last 60 years. "I also thank IAEA for its support to Bangladesh in its development over the last 45 years."

Recalling that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman decided to establish an atomic energy research establishment with the aim to transform the war-ravaged country into a prosperous Golden Bengal, she said a small research reactor had been running successfully at the centre for over 30 years for research, radioisotope production, education and training purposes.

"We regard nuclear energy as a safe, environment-friendly and economically viable source of electricity generation to meet the ever-increasing demand of electricity of the country's

160 million people. It will thus unlock our development potentials through enhanced productivity and sustained growth."

Hasina said Russia-supported Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant would produce 2,400 MW electricity with two reactors. "Our aim is to generate at least 4,000 MW from the nuclear source by 2030."

Bangladesh, she said, enjoyed an excellent collaboration with the IAEA as it successfully completed 138 national projects under technical cooperation and participated in 111 regional projects under the Regional Cooperative Agreement.

Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture (BINA) developed high-yielding, high-nutritive, short-duration, salt- and flood-tolerant and climate-resilient mutant varieties of crops using nuclear technology, radiation and other advanced techniques, the premier told the programme.

Bangladesh already developed 92 improved varieties of 13 crops. The BINA was awarded with the "Outstanding Achievement Award" in 2014 by FAO-IAEA for its contribution towards the achieving food security, Hasina added.

The PM said the number of people who can afford diagnostic medical care in Bangladesh increased 10 times over the last 20 years as the country expanded and stepped up its nuclear medicine services.

"Fifteen public and six private nuclear medicine institutes in the country carry out over 4,00,000 nuclear medicine procedures each year in the areas of medical treatments."

She said the uses of most recent nuclear technologies in cancer treatment were a real help to the people of Bangladesh.

"Science, technology and innovation played a major role in our achievement. A group of Bangladeshi scientists deciphered the complete genetic code of jute with a great success. We've also devised science diplomacy to ensure partnership for sustainable economic development through knowledge generation and sharing," the PM added.

IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano, President of Mauritius Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, President of Uruguay Tabare Vazquez and the chairman of the IAEA Board of Governors also spoke at the programme.

Move to speed up fast-track projects

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crore but it is now being revised down to Tk 4,674 crore. In the first eight months, only Tk 1,798 crore was spent.

In some pre-budget meetings the finance minister, however, expressed hope that the government would be able to complete the bridge within the timeframe.

PADMA BRIDGE RAIL LINK

Padma Bridge Rail Link is scheduled to be completed by 2022. The government, however, intends to build the rail link on the Jazira end of the bridge by December next year.

In the current fiscal year Tk 4,102 crore was allocated for the project and was later further enhanced to Tk 4,813 crore in the revised budget. But, only Tk 566 crore could be spent till February this year.

According to railways ministry officials, China will finance 71 percent of the total project cost. But Chinese Exim Bank has not yet made any formal commitment. In this regard the finance ministry has been continuing exchange of letters with the bank so that the agreement can be signed within this year.

METRO RAIL

Dhaka Mass Rapid Transit Development or Metro Rail project is scheduled to be completed by June 2024. As per the plan by December 2019 it would be made partially operational. But, in reality the progress of the project is very slow.

In the current fiscal year, the allocation was Tk 2,227 crore, which was slashed to Tk 1,182 crore in the revised budget. In

the first eight months of the current fiscal year only Tk 165 crore could be spent. Of the total amount, only 3.19 percent of the project's money could be spent till February this year.

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been financing about 75 percent of the project.

Officials said after the militant attack on Holy Artisan Bakery in Gulshan in July last year, the project implementation slowed down. The officials say it is now picking up.

DOHAZARI-COX'S BAZAR-GUNDUM RAIL PROJECT

Taken in 2010, the Dohazari-Cox's Bazar-Gundum Rail project is set to see its completion by 2022, but there has been no physical work yet.

In the current fiscal year, the initial allocation of Tk 613 crore was revised to Tk 1,031 crore and Tk 822 crore was spent in the first eight months.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) joined the project last year with a 72 percent cost financing commitment and planning ministry officials said, the project got momentum after the ADB joined it. They hoped that the construction work of the rail track could be started this year.

MATARBARI COAL-FIRED POWER PLANT

Another large project is Japan-financed Matarbari Ultra-super Coal-fired power plant. Starting in July 2014, this project's scheduled end period is 2023.

But till February this year, only 2.3 percent of the total project cost has been

spent.

In the current fiscal year, Tk 2,400 crore was allocated in the project but in the first eight months only Tk 277 crore was spent. In the revised budget the allocation has been slashed down to Tk 525 crore.

The implementation of the project slowed down following the militant attack at Holy Artisan Bakery, planning ministry officials said.

ROOPPUR NUCLEAR POWER PLANT In the history of Bangladesh, Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project is the single largest project ever. It is slated to be completed by 2024. The government plans to commission a nuclear based powerplant by 2022.

The project has gained some progress. A Tk 5,087 crore project was taken for the preparatory work in the first phase of the power plant which is now almost at the end stage.

In the second phase the total project cost is Tk 1,13,092 crore. Of this, Tk 10,186 crore has been allocated for the next FY. In the current fiscal year, the revised allocation is Tk 3,407 crore. Of the amount, Tk 800 crore has already been spent.

Apart from the abovementioned six projects, there are four other fast track projects of the government. Among those four projects - Sonadia Deep Seaport, Rampal Power Project and Payra Seaport are at initial stage while two private companies have been awarded work of the Moheshkhali LNG Terminal project.

Budget to get 26pc bigger

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To meet the huge expenditure, the total revenue will have to be increased by 29 percent to make it around Tk 2,88,000 crore. A big chunk of it will come from the National Board of Revenue (NBR), which is eyeing a 34 percent enhanced collection of Tk 2,48,000 crore.

The target for both the VAT and tax collection has been set at 40 percent higher than that in this year's revised budget.

Economists and businessmen strongly oppose the government stance on VAT on grounds that it will push up commodity prices and add to the suffering of people.

But Muhith is hell-bent on fully implementing the VAT law, which came into force in 2012. "I hope there will be no uproar once you see the budget."

Under the VAT law, there will be no tariff once it becomes fully effective. Tax will be much higher for tariff value-based goods.

For example, VAT on MS rod is realised at production level on the basis of tariff value. At present, tariff value on MS rod is Tk 6,000 and VAT amounts to Tk 900 per tonne. Market price of this rod is Tk 50,000 to Tk 60,000.

When the new law comes fully into effect, the tax would be Tk 7,500 instead of Tk 900 now. Prices of other tariff value-based products will go up in the same way.

The current VAT rate is not uniformed.

So under the 15 percent flat rate, or even if it finally stands at 12 percent under pressure from businesses, prices of all products will substantially increase.

At present, various rates of supplementary duty are imposed on 1,362 products at import and supply levels. Under the new law, supplementary duty can be slapped on a maximum of 170 goods and three services. Businesses fear that reduction of supplementary duty may result in lesser protections of local industries.

The government is going tough on the VAT issue in a fiscal year that is only months away from the next general election, due at the end of 2018.

Though it may be politically risky, the government is walking the tight rope as it is commitment-bound to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) from which it took a \$1-billion loan in 2012.

That money came with some reform conditions. Besides, Muhith considers the 2017-18 FY as his last effective budget before the next one, which will directly overlap the election period.

In efforts to allay the fear, Muhith as well as NBR officials said they would exempt many products used by the poorer section of people from the VAT net.

The finance minister also assured that they identified several goods for imposing supplementary duty so that the local industries are not affected.

At the moment, out of the eight lakh

business firms, only 32,000 pay VAT. The government plans to increase the number to 50,000, he added.

Tax-free income is also expected to go up slightly. But wealth surcharge is being increased in every ceiling, as Muhith already indicated his plan to tax the rich more.

It would be interesting to observe how Muhith cuts the balance.

The main focus of Muhith's 9th consecutive budget would be on speeding up implementation of some mega infrastructure projects and boosting private investment to create more jobs.

He would project an economic growth of 7.4 percent in the coming fiscal year as the government seeks to inject life into stagnant private investment and generate employment opportunities, say finance ministry officials.

The government's main target is to finish the construction of the Padma Bridge, which would connect the country's south-western part with the capital. Once completed, it would boost economic output by up to 2 percentage points.

Of the total budgetary outlay, Tk 153,331 crore would be set aside for development expenditure and the rest for non-development expenditure.

Salaries and allowances of government staff, interest payment and subsidies would account for more than half of the non-development expenditure.