

October 22 to be Safe Roads Day

Cabinet okays proposal, recognises Ilias Kanchan's efforts

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Over two decades ago, he had launched a social movement for road safety following the death of his wife in a road crash.

Since then, he has been advocating and persistently promoting the movement for a safe road under the banner "Nirapad Sarak Chai (We demand safe road)".

Ilias Kanchan, a popular film star, also proposed the United Nations to announce an International Road Safety Day to raise awareness about the issue.

His long and ceaseless campaign was finally recognised by the government yesterday through the cabinet approving a proposal to declare October 22, the day Ilias's wife died in 1993, as "The National Safe Roads Day".

Briefing reporters after the weekly cabinet meeting at the Secretariat, Cabinet Secretary M Shafiqul Alam said the day would be officially observed with different campaigns promoting

road safety.

He added that the day was chosen in memory of Ilias's late wife Jahanara Kanchan, who died in a road crash on her way to Bandarban.

The day had so far been observed unofficially. Ilias, the chairman of 'Nirapad Sarak Chai' movement, has played a role in the announcement to officially observe the day, the cabinet secretary added.

Ilias termed the cabinet decision historic. "It's a great decision by the government."

The film star also hoped that observance of the day would boost road safety awareness across the country and help reduce deaths on roads.

"As a result, accidents on roads will come down", he told The Daily Star and urged people to come forward and play their roles to stop road crashes from their respective positions.

Ilias also thanked the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet colleagues for recognising the day.



A woman with a pitcher crosses a makeshift bamboo-made bridge on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. Dhaka South City Corporation is building a drain and pavements in Kutubkhali area of Jatrabari. But the contractor there has made such a trench that locals had to build their bridge with barrels attached to it so that it floated on the stagnant water.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Top Arab nations sever ties with Qatar

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Local media in Qatar reported there was already some panic buying as people stock up on food.

The Qatar Stock Exchange tumbled eight percent on opening and eventually closed down 7.58 percent.

Riyadh said in a statement its measures were the result of "gross violations committed by authorities in Qatar", accusing Doha of harbouring "terrorist and sectarian groups that aim to destabilise the region including the Muslim Brotherhood, Daesh (IS) and al-Qaeda".

Gulf states have for years accused Qatar of supporting extremist groups, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, the world's oldest Islamist organisation.

Riyadh also accused Doha of supporting Iran-backed "terrorist activities" in Saudi Arabia's Shia-dominated area of Qatif, as well as in Bahrain, both of which have seen Shia unrest in recent years.

Any suggestion that Qatar is backing the agenda of Shia-dominated Iran -- Sunni Saudi Arabia's regional arch-rival -- is especially sensitive, particularly in the wake of Trump's comments last month.

Qatar has consistently denied any

support for extremists or Iran and did so again after yesterday's move by its neighbours.

"The measures are unjustified and are based on false and baseless claims," the Qatari foreign ministry said in a statement.

"The aim is clear, and it is to impose guardianship on the state," it said, insisting authorities would "take all measures necessary... to foil attempts to affect or harm Qatar's society and economy".

FLIGHTS CANCELLED

Economic consequences were already emerging, with UAE carriers Emirates, Etihad, flydubai and Air Arabia, as well as Saudi Airlines, announcing the suspension of all flights to and from Qatar as of this morning.

Qatar Airways -- one of the region's busiest airlines -- said it had suspended all flights to Saudi Arabia with immediate effect, at least until the end of yesterday.

The Saudi-led coalition battling Iran-backed rebels in Yemen said it had expelled Qatar from the group.

The coalition accused Qatar of providing "support to (terrorist) organisations in Yemen" -- the first time it has made such a claim.

Gulf countries previously recalled

their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014, ostensibly over its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, but yesterday's moves go much further.

Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies may have felt emboldened by Trump's visit, which saw the new president clearly align US interests with Riyadh and lash out at Iran.

Speaking in Sydney, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said he did not expect the announcement to have "any significant impact, if any impact at all, on the unified fight against terrorism."

He encouraged Qatar and its neighbours to "sit down together", adding that Washington was ready for "any role that we can play" in helping to overcome divisions.

IRAN, TURKEY URGE DIALOGUE

Iran issued a neutral statement on the crisis, urging Qatar and its neighbours to resolve their differences "through political and peaceful methods and dialogue between the parties".

Turkey, which enjoys friendly relations with Qatar and other Gulf countries, offered its help, with Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu telling reporters: "We will give any kind of support for the situation to be normalised."

Hints of an impending crisis

emerged last month when Doha alleged that hackers were behind the release of false remarks attributed to Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani published on the Qatar News Agency website.

The stories quoted him questioning US hostility towards Iran, speaking of "tensions" between Doha and Washington and speculating that Trump might not remain in power for long.

Doha denied the comments and said it had been the victim of a "shameful cybercrime".

Media organisations in several Gulf countries reported the emir's comments as fact, despite Doha's official denial.

The crisis is the worst to hit Gulf Arab nations since the creation in 1981 of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) grouping Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar.

There was no immediate word from Kuwait and Oman yesterday on their ties with Qatar.

Last week, the Qatari emir travelled to Kuwait to meet Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Sabah in what was widely seen as an attempt at mediation by the Kuwaitis.

London attackers

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Jihadist Next Door" about British extremists that was broadcast last year, local media reported.

Redouane was 30 and "claimed to be Moroccan and Libyan". Police said he also used the name of Rachid Elkhadar and a different date of birth that gave his age as 25.

Both men lived in Barking, an ethnically diverse part of east London where police carried out several raids on Sunday and Monday. Ten people are currently in custody.

Police chief Cressida Dick said investigators had seized "a huge amount of forensic material" from the van.

"A very high priority for us is to try to understand whether they were working with anybody else," she told BBC television.

Dick and Mayor Sadiq Khan visited London Bridge as commuters returned to work after some security cordons were removed.

Hundreds of mourners turned out later Monday for a sombre vigil on nearby Tower Bridge.

"To the sick and evil extremists who commit these hideous crimes, we will defeat you. You will not win," Khan said to applause.

The Amaq news agency, which is affiliated with the IS group, said the attacks were carried out by "a detachment of fighters from Islamic State".

A Canadian and a Frenchman were among the fatalities and citizens of several nations were among the 48 injured, including Australia, Bulgaria, France, Greece and New Zealand.

Eighteen are still in critical condition, according to health authorities.

'EVIL' IDEOLOGY

May blamed "evil" Islamist ideology and vowed to crack down on extremist content online, warning that attackers were "copying one another".

She said the same ideology was behind the May 22 suicide bombing at a pop concert in Manchester that left 22 people dead, and the Westminster Bridge attack in March, which killed five.

Britain's response to the terror threat must change, she said, after the three attacks which in total left 34 dead and some 200 injured.

"We cannot and must not pretend that things can continue as they are," she said, adding there was "far too much tolerance of extremism in our country".

But May's own record came under fire from Labour, which -- according to opinion polls questioned for their reliability -- has closed the gap on her Conservatives ahead of Thursday's election.

Campaigning resumed yesterday after being suspended for a day.

Corbyn noted that for six years, police numbers fell while May was in charge of security as interior minister, implementing a budget-cutting drive.

Asked by ITV television if he backed the calls for May to resign, he said: "Indeed I would."

His party is calling for a drive to hire thousands of officers for neighbourhood duties, arguing that a grassroots approach will curb crime and radicalisation.

May insisted London police were happy with their resources, while counter-terrorism budgets had been protected and the number of armed officers had increased.

SPAT WITH TRUMP

Britain was already on high alert following the attack at a concert by US pop star Ariana Grande in Manchester in which seven children were among the dead.

Grande headlined a benefit concert in the northwestern city on Sunday, alongside stars including Pharrell Williams and Justin Bieber.

The national threat level was raised to maximum after the Manchester attack and troops were deployed at key public sites, but reduced to its second-highest level last weekend.

Saturday's rampage was the latest in a string of attacks to hit Europe, including in Paris, Berlin and Saint Petersburg.

Global leaders sent messages of support, though US President Donald Trump raised British hackles by attacking Khan on Twitter and enlisting the attack to defend his thwarted travel ban.

Asked about the comments, Khan told Sky News: "I just haven't got time to respond to tweets from Donald Trump."

Duty on solar panels

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These measures benefitted three crore people, including children who can study using light from solar power, Dipal said.

"Bangladesh has largest solar home systems in the world mainly because of zero duty on import of solar panels since 2009."

Moreover, solar-powered irrigation system has gained popularity.

The country aims to generate 10 percent electricity from renewable energy by 2020 from present 2.86 percent of 15,594 MW power generating capacity.

Already, over 600 solar irrigation pumps have been installed and more to come to cut dependency on electricity and diesel used to operate more than 16 lakh tube wells and pumps for irrigation.

According to Dipal, president of the solar energy association, local assemblers are yet to be equipped to make panels that can be used for irrigation.

Solar panels will also be required to

install on rooftops and for setting up mini grids and street lights, he said. The proposed import duty will lead to spiraling of the prices of solar panels that cost more than half of what is spent on installing solar systems.

The increase in cost will affect the government's bid to buy electricity from private solar power plants connected to the national grid, insiders say.

The government has issued Letter of Intent (LoI) to buy 830 MW of electricity from grid-connected solar power plants. Power purchase agreements have been signed for 302 MW, according to Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA).

"If the duty comes into effect, we will face difficulty. We may have to renegotiate all the contacts we have signed so far. The price of solar-panel-based electricity will increase," said Siddique Zobair, a member of the sustainable energy authority.

Entrepreneurs, who have been

showing interest in installing solar panels on rooftops of their factories, will not go ahead with the plan due to the price hike, said officials of Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL).

"Entrepreneurs will feel discouraged," said IDCOL Chief Executive Mahmood Malik.

It is difficult to make solar irrigation projects viable even after the government bears 50 percent of the installation cost, he said, adding that import duty would make the situation more unfavourable.

It may be tough to attain the 10 percent renewable energy generation goal by 2020 after imposition of the import duty, Siddique said, suggesting that import duty on solar panels should be zero as it is now.

The government should support local manufacturers in other ways such as tax exemption, he added.

Dipal suggested giving incentives to domestic solar module makers for exporting products.

The government can also use a share of locally-manufactured solar panels for its programmes like Test Relief and offer rebate, he said.

Munawar Misbah Moin, president of Solar Module Manufacturers Association of Bangladesh, said local manufacturers were calling for government support since imports of cheap and sub-standard panels were hurting their businesses worth Tk 200 crore.

Panels are imported from China where exporters enjoy 17 percent incentive, he added.

Local manufacturers also urged the government to buy locally-made solar panels for use under the Test Relief and Food for Work programmes.

A minimum price gap should be maintained between raw materials and complete products so that local manufacturers can sustain their business.

"The duty hike will help the local industry. The government should have a comprehensive policy to help the local industry thrive," Moin said.

Kabul to host peace summit

AFP, Kabul

Kabul will host a multinational peace conference on Afghanistan today, as the capital reels from a wave of bombings and clashes that left more than 100 people dead and hundreds wounded in the last week.

Much of Kabul remains on lockdown ahead of the conference, labelled the "Kabul Process", with tighter than usual security including more armed checkpoints and armoured vehicles patrolling the streets, and tight restrictions on civilian traffic.

Representatives of around 24 countries will attend the meeting, which aims to build international support on ways to restore security in the conflict-torn country, the government said yesterday.

"The Kabul Process is meant to reach a consensus with the region and the world for peace in Afghanistan," said presidential spokesman Shah Hussain Murtazawi.

EU slaps cargo curbs on Dhaka

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sources quoted the EU envoy as saying at the meeting.

Aviation sources say none of the two security measures have been adopted at Shahjalal airport.

Pierre Mayaudon also told the CAAB chief that the EU will send its aviation security team for inspection if Dhaka introduces necessary security equipment at the airport and informs them about it, according to the director of Shahjalal airport, who was present at the meeting.

Before informing the EU about the step taken, Bangladesh will have to get clearance certificate from the International Civil Aviation Organisation on successful setting up of explosive detection system.

Contacted, Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Rashed Khan Menon yesterday said there is also

another option using which Bangladesh will be able to operate cargo services to Europe.

"In that case, Bangladesh will have to pay a certain amount of fees to the export destinations for carrying out a second screening through explosive detection system."

Menon said the EU came up with the decision all of a sudden without communicating with the Bangladesh authorities.

The minister also said the EU took the decision at a time when Bangladesh is upgrading Shahjalal airport in terms of security and goods screening.

The ministry will do whatever is needed to get the restriction lifted as soon as possible, he added.

A high official of CAAB told The Daily Star, "They [EU] have put us on the red list without talking to us. We have advanced a lot in terms of

goods screening and other security issues at Shahjalal airport. It's unfortunate that the EU took the unilateral decision."

Wishing anonymity, a minister said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was informed about the EU move during yesterday's cabinet meeting.

Asked about this, Menon said the PM has advised him to consult the foreign ministry.

Apart from Bangladesh, 12 countries are on the high-risk list, sources said.

According to Menon, Bangladesh and Kuwait are the latest to be on the list.

ADVERSE IMPACT?

Officials at the CAAB and the civil aviation ministry ruled out the possibility of any adverse impact of the EU restriction.

But SM Jahangir Hossain, president of Bangladesh Fruits Vegetables

and Allied Products Exporters Association, said the news came as a major blow for them as export costs will increase significantly.

"Besides, there are risks involved in second screenings in third countries," he added.

"We will suggest that the government should sit with the EU and fix the problem immediately."

Siddiqui Rahman, president of Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters' Association (BGMEA), said he is still unaware of the European Union move.

"If it [restriction] happens, the consequences will be serious," he said.

Abdus Salam Murshedy, managing director of Envoy Group and president of BGMEA, said Bangladesh's competitiveness will be further eroded.

"Double checking of our cargo will push the cost and time up."

As Bangladesh has no deep-sea port, its lead time for export to the EU and the US is 10 days and 15 days higher respectively than that of China and India, two main competitors, he added.

Rezaul Hasanat, chairman and CEO of Viyellatex Group, said double screening by a third party will raise the cost of exports.

"We have to bear the costs of scanning of our cargoes by the third party," he said.

Bangladesh raked in \$18.68 billion from its exports to the EU in 2015-16, which was 54.57 percent of the total receipts for the fiscal year.

Of the \$18.68 billion, \$17.15 billion came from apparel shipments. The EU currently accounts for over 60 percent of all Bangladesh's garment export receipts a year.