

Purchase of Chinese submarines won't affect int'l relations

PM tells Jatiya Sangsad

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday told parliament that the purchase of two submarines from China would not elicit "negative reactions" from the international political arena, as it was an issue of Bangladesh's national interest.

On March 12, PM included two submarines – BN Nabajitra and BN Joyjitra – into the Navy fleet for the first time in history with a view to intensifying the monitoring of the Bay and enhancing the force's combat capability.

The submarines were purchased from China, one of the important development partners of the country, to strengthen the defence system by upgrading the Naval force to a three-dimensional one, Hasina said in a scripted reply to lawmakers' queries.

"The two submarines have strengthened our defence system much more compared to its previous situation," she said, and that has improved Bangladesh's position in national and international politics, the leader of the

House said.

Both the submarines are 76 metres in length and 7.6 metres in width and are equipped with torpedoes and mines capable of attacking enemy warships and submarines.

In response to another query, the PM informed the House that her government had a plan to form a separate police unit to combat militancy and different other crimes.

On the issue of exporting manpower, she said that as many as 46.79 lakh people got jobs abroad since 2015.

Regarding the government's action to ensure human rights, Hasina in a scripted answer said her government had reconstituted the National Human Rights Commission to make it independent and neutral.

In line with the Paris Principal of the United Nations, the government reconstituted the NHRC by appointing a chairman and six members in June 2010. "The government is pledged to develop and protect human rights in the country by strengthening the commission, the PM added.



The appalling state of Mirpur Road near Technical Intersection of the capital yesterday. The puddles are actually large potholes and vehicles crawl to get past this stretch of the road.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

EC sends letters to 40 parties

Asks for names to prepare for next month's dialogue

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The Election Commission has asked all the registered political parties to send the name of a person each within seven working days so that it can contact them for an electoral dialogue and other related issues.

The commission is likely to open the dialogue next month which might continue through October. Copies of a letter signed by EC Secretary Muhammad Abdullah were sent to 40 political parties on Tuesday.

According to the letter, each political party should send the name of a focal person, his phone and fax numbers, e-mail and mailing address by July 31.

"We've requested the political parties to send the names for smooth communication. We sent the letters as we will have more engagement with the political parties in the coming months," the EC secretary said. "The party offices might have changed," the EC secretary told The Daily Star yesterday.

The commission earlier decided to hold talks with the political parties to discuss various important issues.

It will also organise a dialogue with some civil society members at the EC secretariat at 3:00pm on July 31.

Abdullah said the commission previously decided to invite 50 civil society members, including educationists, intellectuals and former advisers to caretaker government, to join the talks.

The EC recently finalised a roadmap for the next parliamentary polls putting emphasis on seven issues.

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Rain worsens northern flood

FROM PAGE 1

Floodwater has been affecting more and more localities of Sariakandi, Sonatola and Dhunat upazilas, adding to the sufferings of the flood victims.

District Relief Office source said the low-lying areas on the Jamuna basin – 57 villages of nine unions in Sariakandi, 21 villages in three unions in Sonatola and 14 villages under 11 unions in Dhunat – were inundated, affecting at least 70,000 people of 18,000 families.

Mohsin Ali, deputy assistant agriculture officer of the Department

of Agriculture Extension, said 4,935 hectares of cropland was inundated that affected 23,554 farmers in the three upazilas. Aush on 1,710 hectares, June on 3,070 hectares, seedling on 48 hectares and vegetables on 107 hectares were flooded, he added.

KURIGRAM
Around 1,53,000 people of around 38,000 flood-hit families of 41 unions under seven upazilas have been marooned, official sources said.

Around 4,216 families have fallen victim to river erosion in recent floods. The government has so far distributed

300 tonnes of rice, Tk 8.25 lakh and 2,000 packets of dry food among the affected families, the officials added.

GAIBANDHA

The Jamuna and the Ghagor rivers yesterday swelled further following onrush of upstream water, flooding vast tracts of four upazilas.

According to the Water Development Board (WDB), the Jamuna was flowing 55cm and Ghagor 41cm above the danger mark. Around 95,000 people in four upazilas have been marooned.

JAMALPUR
Flood situation has deteriorated badly

as the Jamuna was flowing 81cm above the danger level at Rahadurabhat Ghat point at 3:00pm yesterday, according to WDB.

Around 1,76 lakh people of 320 villages under 27 unions in Islampur, Dewanganj, Madarganj and Sharihabari upazilas have been badly affected, said district administration sources.

Around 75,000 people of 121 villages in Islampur and around 42,000 people at 110 villages in Dewanganj have been marooned, the sources added.

9 Sitakunda kids die in 4 days

FROM PAGE 1

Rupali Tripura, youngest daughter of Suman Kumar Tripura, died yesterday morning at her home. Three-year-old Rupali was having fever and rash all over her body for three days, said her uncle, Pradip Kumar Tripura.

"We took her to a man who practices homeopathy. He lives some two kilometres away. He had given Rupali some medicines."

Asked why they did not take the child to a hospital, Pradip said the upazila health centre was 15 kilometres away from their home. Besides,

they did not have money to buy medicines which would have been prescribed by doctors.

Shimal Tripura was among the children who died yesterday. His father Biman Tripura said the two-year-old boy had been suffering from fever for six days. Shimal was also taken to a local man who practices homeopathy.

Contacted, Nasir Uddin, a member of ward-4 of Sonachinri Union Parishad, said he came to know about the disease after the death of the four children yesterday.

"I have visited the area and

informed the upazila nibahi officer about the incident," he said, adding that many parents of the children suffering from the disease were "reluctant" to go to the hospital.

Civil Surgeon Azizur said a medical team visited the hilly area and conducted medical checkups of the children there.

Initially, six children were taken to the health complex in Sitakunda and then to the hospital in Foulderhat. The others were taken to hospitals later.

"The disease could not be identified immediately," he said, adding, "The

sick children are aged between one and 12. Their symptoms include fever, body rash, breathing problem, vomiting, blood in stool and fainting."

Asked whether the disease could be transmitted by mosquitoes, he said, "It does not seem so. If it was, then why only children were being affected?"

Another medical team from the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research in Dhaka was dispatched for Sitakunda, he said, adding that the local primary school was shut down to prevent the spread of the disease.

Floating island in the making

FROM PAGE 16

sports for accommodating housing, ports, farms or parks.

Made up of 87 floating triangles of different sizes, the huge, flexible island will be made of concrete or steel and eventually stretch 1.5 to two kilometres (one to 1.2 miles), or a total of three square kilometres.

Squeezed for space in this tiny metropolis, some cities, "some cities are starting to look into floating solutions, like a floating park on the river for example, where they want to

have an area for recreation close by the city centre," Olaf Waals from the Maritime Centre of the Netherlands (MTC) told AFP.

If plans for floating islands go ahead it would be a unique solution which reflect the low-lying country, much of which under the centuries has been reclaimed from the sea and which is protected from the waters by an intricate system of dykes and canals.

In these times of rising sea levels, overpopulated cities and rising number of activities on the seas, building up

the dykes and pumping out the sands is perhaps not the most efficient solution," said Waals, referring to common methods to reclaim land.

"Floating ports and cities are an innovative solution which reflect the Dutch maritime tradition."

The model, which measures roughly by six metres and is made of wood and polyethylene, was laid out Tuesday in a huge water tank to simulate the waves and storms in a presentation for several potential investors.

According to MARIN director Bas Buchner, discussions are underway with the local authority of crowded Haarlemmermeer and the Lelystad airport, both close to the burgeoning capital of Amsterdam, the daily Telegraph reported.

But the project remains at the early stages, the institute said.

The islands would be anchored to the seabed and also moored to the shore. But tests will need to be carried out on how they will withstand weather conditions and tidal movements.

Rice crisis catches Qamrul napping

FROM PAGE 1

minister's "Branding Programme" but never making any effort to replenish the fast depleting stock.

It didn't occur to the food minister that it has to either locally procure or import rice to fill the granaries. It didn't also pursue policy measures, such as duty cuts on import, which would encourage private procurement from global market. The duty on rice import was 28 percent at the time, discouraging private importers from procuring the staple from international market.

Ultimately, the market forces came into play in a nasty way, with private traders and rice millers finding a way to force a rice to windfall through price hike.

Qamrul eventually moved to import rice, but it was too late. Already, prices of rice, especially the coarse ones consumed by the poor, had risen 47 percent increase on year-on-year basis.

It remains a riddle why the food ministry allowed the year-end food stock to dip below five lakh tonnes (in June FY2017) whereas the rice import was 13 lakh tonnes in FY2016-17, 13 lakh tonnes in FY2015 and over 10 lakh tonnes in the two preceding years.

With the government having so poor a stock and the early flashfloods destroying much of the Haor's Boro output, the predominantly private sector-led grain market seized the opportunity, much to the agony of low-income consumers.

When the government's rice stock in hand in April and I thought we'll be able to replenish the stock by a good Boro purchase during May-June. But that didn't happen. That's what we're now importing rice to replenish the market," Qamrul told this paper.

But he never explained what stopped his ministry and the food department from early import when it was clear that food stock had already dipped to six-year low.

Private sector import almost came to a grinding halt due to government foot-dragging on relaxing the heavy import duty slapped in FY2014-15. Only on June 20, the duty was cut down to 10 percent, facilitating late entry of some relatively cheap rice from India.

Because of the delay in making the import decision, the government now has to pay more as rice prices on international market have gone up in the past two months.

In May, the food department

could get 1 lakh tonnes of rice at Tk 346.24 crore from Vietnam. But in June, the government imported 25 lakh tonnes of rice at Tk 908.85 crore.

The government is now considering importing rice from Thailand, where export prices of white rice rose by 10 percent, the highest since August 2014, according to the Thailand Trade Commission.

This means, the government will have to commit more money when it strikes a deal, expected next week, to import Thai rice.

Back in April, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) had cautioned the government: "Rising food inflation since January 2017 needs to be closely monitored in view of its adverse effect on the poorer house-holds. Rising rice price in recent months in the backdrop of declining public stock appears to be the major cause that is pushing food inflation upward. At present, coarse rice price is about 24 percent higher than a year ago. Also, average rice price in Bangladesh is about 27.9 percent higher than that in India."

The country's leading independent think-tank also observed that "Curiously, distribution of rice and wheat saw a strong growth (12.3 per

cent) in the backdrop of the decline in import, procurement and stock figures."

The thought of low food stock occurred to the food ministry only in June when, for the first time, Qamrul acknowledged before parliament that the government's rice stock was indeed low. He then said the process to import six lakh tonnes of rice was underway.

Data point to a negative correlation between stock and price. Coarse rice was selling below Tk 31 a kg when stock was 10 lakh tonnes. It shot up to Tk 35 as the stock slipped below 10 lakh tonnes, to Tk 39 when it slid below eight lakh tonnes and to Tk 43 as the stock slipped below six lakh tonnes.

Agricultural economist Jahangir Alam told The Daily Star that although some rice was lost in the Haor flashfloods, the price should not have jumped so high. He questioned why the government allowed its rice stock to deplete in the first place.

"Why have they [food ministry and food directorate] failed to keep the minimum security stock of rice in the granaries?" said Ilahti Dad Khan, former director of the food directorate who had a crucial crisis

management role during the 2007-08 global economic meltdown and the 2011 rice shortage.

"They should have noticed well in advance that how fast the food godowns were drying up due to continuous operations of open market sale (OMS) since January and exhausting of stock through distributions under the Tk 10/per kg rice distribution programme."

During this time in the food directorate, there was always an effort to keep one million tonnes of food (rice and wheat) stock reserve in the godowns, he said.

Dr AMM Shawkat Ali, former caretaker government adviser who was agriculture secretary in late 1990s, said the government should have allowed private traders to import rice by reducing the high duty much earlier.

What took the government so long to go for the duty cut?" he wondered.

Director General of Bangladesh Fisheries Development Studies (BIDS) Dr KAS Murshid noted the food ministry should have moved fast to replenish stock when they were releasing rice in big volume for distribution among the ultra poor at Tk 10/kg.

Workers could go on strike on July 23

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Water transport workers yesterday threatened to go for countryside indefinite strike from midnight July 23 unless their 21-point demands are met.

Shah Alam Bhuiyan, president of Bangladesh Noutjan Samik Federation, declared this ultimatum from a rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club yesterday.

Later, they brought out a procession and started their way to the Prime Minister's Office to submit a memorandum there. However, police intercepted the procession near Kadam Fara besides the Jatiya Eidgah.

A delegation from the federation later submitted the memorandum to the prime minister.

The federation's demands include repatriation of eight transport workers who are in an Indian jail since March 22, and immediate release of eight other workers who were convicted in a case filed for the capsize of MV Koko-4.

Chowdhury Ashique Alam, general secretary of the federation, said the eight workers were arrested from near Haldia port in Kolkata, when they went to buy daily supplies. A case has been filed against them and they are now in jail, he said.

On April 25, the Marine Court in Dhaka punished Koko company and nine of its staff as it found them guilty of causing MV Koko-4 to capsize that left 81 people killed and many more injured.

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Eleven killed

FROM PAGE 1

These workers cannot leave the country or switch jobs without written permission from their current employer under kafala, and employers often confiscate their passports and travel documents.

But this is not the first time that Qamrul and his ministry acted late. About two years ago, when wheat stock dried up in government silos, the food department hurriedly imported over two lakh tonnes of substandard wheat from a new market – Brazil.

The grain quality and insect infestation sparked a huge outcry across the country. Even ruling Awami League men put up barricades at places, blocking entry of the consignments into public granaries. Later, the minister had to declare in parliament that they would not import wheat from Brazil any more and acknowledged that "the wheat looks bad."

In the very next domestic wheat growing season, the first time in Asia, blast (fungal disease) in wheat. That caused a huge crop loss in wheat and scientists later confirmed the emergence of wheat blast in Bangladesh was caused by a South American lineage of fungus.

The government never investigated if there was any direct link between the import from Brazil and the blast attack, but among the scientific fraternity there is a strong suspicion that there is.