

Next Polls Several parties discuss launch of a political platform

Organisers allege police
tried to stop the meeting
at Rob's Uttara house

Staff Correspondent

Leaders of several political parties last night met to discuss the launching of a political platform with eye on the next general election due in late 2018 or early 2019.

Law enforcers allegedly tried to disrupt the meeting at Jatia Samajantrik Dal (JSD-Rob) President Asim Abdur Rob's Uttara residence. Talking to The Daily Star, Nagorik Olmoya Convener Mahmud Rahman Manna said they sat to discuss the launch of a political platform ahead of the election.

But Rob said it was an informal gathering after Eid.

He alleged police tried to prevent them from gathering, citing "instructions from the higher authorities."

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Qatar crisis

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refusing Qatar access to their airspace and ordering their citizens back home.

They also presented the emirate with a list of 13 demands with which to comply and the worst political crisis in the region for years.

Qatar denies the charges of extremism and claims the demands are "unrealistic."

It also called the boycott has led to human rights violations, and one group yesterday said abuses were a consequence of the crisis.

"Hundreds of Saudis, Bahrainis, and Emiratis have been forced into the impossible situation of either leaving their homes or leaving behind their families and jobs," said Sarah Leah Whitson of Human Rights Watch.

Tillerson arrived back in Doha after meeting Saudi Arabia's King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman 24 hours earlier.

On his previous visit on Tuesday, the US and Qatar signed an agreement to combat terror funding, subsequently dismissed as "insufficient" by the Saudis.

The United States, a longtime ally of Sunni-led Saudi Arabia, has given mixed signals about its policy on Gulf crisis.

While President Donald Trump welcomed the Arab states' decision to sever air and land links to their gas-rich neighbor, the State Department has taken a more neutral position and Tillerson has sought to broker a diplomatic solution.

Tillerson's crisis has prompted Tillerson, well known in the Gulf from his ExxonMobil role as chief of energy giant, as Washington's top diplomat.

The United States and its Western allies have vast economic and political interests in the Gulf, which pumps one fifth of the world's oil.

While Saudi Arabia is a key US ally, Qatar is home to the US military's largest air base in the region, Al-Udeid, Royal Bahraini houses the US Navy Fifth Fleet.

On Tuesday, speaking in Doha, Tillerson described Qatar as being "reasonable" in its dispute with the four states.

But an ongoing crisis may not be seen as such a bad thing in the west, as it has been for three allies – Saudi, UAE, Qatar – to try to find a mutually agreeable solution," Christopher Davidson, an expert on Middle East geopolitics, wrote in Beirut for The Washington Post.

US, UN, and EU, said in Washington, told AP.



A child suffering from a yet-to-be-identified disease receiving IV drip at the Bangladesh Special and Infectious Disease (BITD) in Fouzdarhat of Chittagong. Parents taking their sick children to hospital, top right, yesterday after they started showing symptoms similar to those shown by several children before their deaths at Sonachhari Para in Sitakunda of Chittagong. A small branch of Neem tree is wedged into the wall of a home in Sonachhari Para, bottom right. The inhabitants believe the branch would keep diseases away.

PHOTO: AMRUP KANTI DAS

'Disease new', problem old

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"The cause of the disease might be known once we get the test results. It would take six to seven days," Chief Scientific Officer Faruk Ahmed Bhuiyan, who led the team, told The Daily Star.

All the victims are between one and 12 years old and the symptoms include fever, rash, breathing problems, vomiting, and blood in stool, said Asim Rahman Siddique, civil surgeon of the district.

Of them, 13 are admitted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital while the rest to Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Disease in Sitakunda's Fouzdarhat, he said.

Fank said all of them had been suffering from malnutrition for long. For this reason, their immune system was weak. Some of them were already suffering from diseases like measles and

diarrhoea.

Health officials had already taken their blood and urine samples and tested for malaria, typhoid and paratyphoid. But the results were negative, he said, adding, "We will now try to find out whether it is chikungunya, swine flu or any other disease."

Fank said they would test the water and food found in Sitakunda Para.

Talking about the seven children who became ill yesterday, Civil Surgeon Azizur said, "They were very weak. But their condition was improving as they were on a nutritious diet at the hospital in Fouzdarhat."

Dr Enshad Ekramullah, assistant professor of medicine at the hospital, echoed the same.

DELAY IN PROPER TREATMENT

As children were falling sick one by one

since early last week, their parents did not take them to the hospital. They opted for local quacks and shamans, said locals.

Some parents said they performed different rituals seeking their recovery. Nishirum Tripara, the oldest man in Tripara Para where some 64 indigenous families live, said he had never seen so many children becoming ill at a time.

"When the children were dying or becoming sick, we performed many rituals. Some of the ailing kids were washed with boiled water," said the man in his late 80s.

Some were given homeopathy treatment. In most cases, it did not work.

Nine children died in four days since Saturday. Four of them died on Wednesday, prompting the parents to take their children to Sitakunda Upazila

Health Complex, which is about 15kms away.

NOT VACCINATED

Enshad and Fank told The Daily Star that none of the children was vaccinated.

Rajkumar Tripara, a local, said they had no idea about the vaccination programmes. He also claimed that health workers had not visited the area for a long time.

Asked why the sick children had not been admitted to hospital before, he said, "Who would do that? We live from hand to mouth. How can we afford to buy medicines that would have been prescribed by doctors?"

Almost all the people in that area are extremely poor. The males mainly work in orchards and jhum lands, he said.

Shyam Charan Tripara, a physically-challenged person who cannot work, was

compelled to beg to feed his family. When his eight-year-old son Asim Tripara became ill, he could not do anything for his treatment.

The boy died on Wednesday.

CRISIS OF DRINKING WATER

The families in Tripara Para mainly collect their drinking water from a small canal in the hilly area. Sometimes, wastes are dumped into that water body, making the water dirty.

There is only one deep tube well there. It, however, went out of order two years ago.

Cunadham Tripara, another local, said they do not boil water before drinking.

Contacted, local UP member Nasir Uddin said he was unaware that the tube wells were not working. "Actually, they did not inform us about it. If they don't tell us then how can we know about it?"

Shipping deal

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For example, they said Maersk Shipping Line, the largest shipping company in the world, now use Kelang for its mother vessels. It used to use Colombo before.

"It will fully depend on a shipping line...," said a senior shipping ministry official who was involved in the joint working group of the two countries.

On giving Bangladesh priority in berthing in Colombo, the official said, it was not a big issue as a ship could easily get on-arrival berth at Colombo port.

"If we can route some of these mother vessels through Colombo port, it will be a big boost for our shipping industry," said Sheikh Mahfuz Hamid, managing director of Gulf Seaways.

He said Bangladesh's export, especially garments and pharmaceuticals, to Sri Lanka would significantly increase, as vessels would be directly moving between the ports of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Mahfuz said a deal on coastal shipping would be more effective for Bangladesh as freight cost would be low.

"This company has ships that ply along the coastline of Bangladesh and India."

A shipping ministry official said coastal shipping agreement was under process and that it would be signed this month around.

Bangladesh High Commissioner in Colombo Raza Hamidullah told The Sri Lankan newspaper Ceylon Today, "Our thinking is that if we get the right kind of incentives and facilities, we can ask our exporters and importers, to shift their cargo to a very

logical port like Colombo."

"According to him, at this point, 20 percent of Bangladesh's transhipment cargo, particularly bound for the West, is calling on Colombo Port," the paper said.

The high commissioner also noted that the maritime connectivity would be a game changer.

Officials in Dhaka said the two sides want to make feeder vessel services operational between other seaports of the two countries, like Mongla and Payra in Bangladesh and Trincomalee, Hambantota and Jaffna in Sri Lanka, and even with ports of other countries in the Bay of Bengal region.

Sri Lanka already has a good exposure in shipping logistics and LP Gas business in Bangladesh. Sri Lanka hopes its president's visit would boost its business further.

The other treaties expected to be signed today include agreements regarding cooperation in agricultural, education, trade and investment, information and communication technology, promotion and reciprocal protection of investment, tariff reduction, deals between the two central banks, foreign service institutes, and a treaty between Bangladesh's think-tank BISS and Sri Lanka's LKIRSS.

A deal was expected to be signed for cooperation between two standards testing institutions, news agencies, Chittagong BCGMA Fashion Institute and Sri Lanka Textile and Apparel Institute.

Bangladesh's State Minister for Foreign Affairs Md Shahriar Alam said trade, investment, agricul-

ture, fisheries, coastal shipping, education, information technology and visa-related issues would come up during Sirisena's meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina around 10:00am today.

He said they were also in talks with Sri Lanka for a free trade agreement. The two-way trade is around \$90 million but there was huge potential for expansion, he said.

Officials said since Sri Lanka is a small country with a population of only 20 million, Bangladesh's opportunity to increase export there would be small. Sri Lankan businessmen and entrepreneurs should look to invest in a larger country like Bangladesh.

The Sri Lankan president was given a warm welcome at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport when President Abdul Hamid received him.

This is Sirisena's first visit to Bangladesh as president.

He paid tribute at National Martyrs Memorial in Savar and Bangabandhu Memorial Museum yesterday.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali called on him in the evening.

Speaker of Jatiya Sangsad Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, Health Minister Mohammad Nordin, and Leader of the Opposition Raushan Ershad were expected to call on Sirisena at his Sonargaon Hotel suite today.

The Sri Lankan president would meet Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid at Bangabhaban this evening. President Hamid would also host a banquet in honour of the visiting president.

9 rivers cross danger line

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Bangladesh keeps swelling but the water level of the Ganges is far below the danger mark.

"The flood situation in the country would turn worse if the water levels of the Brahmaputra and the Ganges cross the danger mark simultaneously. But the Ganges is currently flowing four metres below the line."

However, it is hard to say what will happen in August or September as the forecasting centre is not able to make projections beyond one week based on the available data.

The situation will largely depend on how much it rains in the upstream of the Ganges basin in the coming days, Saezzad Hossain said.

India Meteorological Department has warned of heavy rains this monsoon in a number of Indian states, including Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and West Bengal, raising the possibility of a fresh deluge.

There is also a forecast of heavy downpour in northeastern states of India, including Mizoram, Manipur, Sikkim, Tripura and Bihar.

Downpours in all these states would directly affect northern Bangladesh as the water would roll down to that region through the Jamuna and the Teesta.

Dhaka Met office said there is no forecast of long-term heavy rain in Bangladesh. But there will be "normal" downpours in August and September.

Many rivers that stream down to the Bangladesh plains from the northeastern states of India are fed with heavy rains this year. Within just

three weeks of the start of this monsoon season, an early flood occurred in Sylhet region and another flood in the northern region.

The situation in the Sylhet region started to improve as the water of the Surma and Kushiyara receded a few days back. But their levels are again on the rise.

Out of 90 observing stations in the country, 70 show rising trends with water flowing above the danger level at 14 points.

In Assam, heavy showers in the upstream caused severe flood in the last few weeks inundating 20 districts and affecting thousands of people.

However, Bangladesh will not see a massive flooding like that of 1978 or 1988, said Dr Rashid Chowdhury, climatologist at the Pacific ENSO Applications Climate Centre, University of Hawaii.

"I think Bangladesh will experience a normal or slightly above normal flooding in 2017," he said.

In a "normal flood," at least 30,000 square kilometres of area is inundated, experts say. The current flood affected 13 districts, including five in the northern region, but it is still "below normal".

Rashed, who has been doing research on El Nino and La Nina and long-term flood forecasting method, said Bangladesh's flood is highly correlated with strong La Nina event which is not present at the moment.

El Nino and La Nina are complex weather patterns caused by variations in ocean temperatures in the Equatorial Pacific.

Food, drinking water crisis in the North

Star Report

The demand for food and safe drinking water is increasing in the flood-hit northern districts where thousands of people have been left marooned.

The flood situation has remained grave there for the last three to four days as the Jamuna and the Brahmaputra were flowing above the danger level, resulting in a crisis of food and safe water.

Many educational institutions have been shut down. Thousands of hectares of cultivable land have gone under water. Massive river erosion was looming at some places.

Talking to The Daily Star correspondents, several flood-hit people said relief goods allocated for them by the

government was inadequate.

The Jamuna, Dhaka, Chagot, Atrai, Dhaleswari, Kobadka, Surma and Kushiyara were flowing over the danger mark at places following heavy rain in the last couple of days.

According to the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre of Bangladesh Water Development Board, the water level of the Jamuna might slightly rise.

The Ganges and the Padma may continue rising in next 48 hours while the Surma was also showing rising trends.

In Kurigram, flood has left some 1,78,232 people of 42 unions marooned. At least 50 flood-hit families have taken shelter on an embankment of the Kurigram district in Jaitpur union under Kurigram Sadar Upazila.

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People bring in their goats to higher ground after their homes and surrounding areas went under floodwater in Sariakandi of Bogra yesterday. Along with flood, drinking water, and shelter scarcity, there is an acute crisis of fodder in the flood-affected areas.

PHOTO: STAR

Relief for flood victims scanty

Raushan tells JS

Staff Correspondent

Opposition Leader Raushan Ershad yesterday in parliament said the flood-affected people were not getting adequate relief.

In her winding up speech at the 16th session of the House, she demanded that the government ensure fair distribution of relief.

Raushan, also senior co-chair of Jatiya Party, lauded Finance Minister AMA Muhith for placing "a very good budget" in parliament.

"It is very difficult to prepare a budget for a country like us. He has faced many difficulties while preparing the budget. I congratulate him for giving us a nice budget," she added amid clapping of MPs from opposition and

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