

ROHINGYA CRISIS EU for stepping up measures against Myanmar

UNB, Dhaka

The European Union has reiterated its full support to resolve the Rohingya crisis, including speeding up restrictive measures against Myanmar.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali yesterday had a bilateral meeting with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and European Commission Vice President Federica Mogherini in Brussels and discussed various issues of mutual interest, including the Rohingya issue.

Mogherini renewed EU's full support for early resolution of the crisis, including stepping up measures against Myanmar, a foreign ministry official told UNB.

She expressed high admiration and appreciation for Bangladesh's "generosity, patience, solidarity and humanity" in dealing with the Rohingya crisis.

They also discussed SOPs (standard operating procedures) on return of irregular migrants and expressed satisfaction at the progress made in terms of its implementation.

The high representative informed the Minister of the Council Conclusions on Myanmar, covering the situation of the Rohingya, adopted on February 26 by the EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

The discussion also touched upon the EU-Bangladesh relations, including the political situation in Bangladesh.

The meeting was an opportunity to discuss the ongoing efforts to address the situation of the Rohingya, over 670,000 of whom have fled Myanmar for Bangladesh in recent months, said an EU media release.

Mogherini reiterated that the EU is fully mobilised politically and through extensive humanitarian assistance to help bring about a positive outcome.

In this context, the bilateral

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Dhaka turns

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organised by Swadhin Bangla Chhatra Sangram Parishad.

The parishad unveiled the Manifesto of Independence and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced his Non-cooperation Movement at the programme.

He said payment of taxes would be suspended until the government repressions stopped and hartal would be observed every day from 6:00am to 2:00pm.

"Come to Race Course on 7 March, I shall announce the next course of action," he said.

All offices, courts, factories, schools, colleges, transport services remained closed.

To quell the rebellion, the Pakistan government imposed curfew on Dhaka, Rangpur and Sylhet.

In Rangpur, a 24-hour curfew was imposed from 2:30pm amid clashes between the Pakistani army and civilians.

In Sylhet, the curfew was imposed from 7:30am to 7:30pm while in Dhaka, it was from 10:30pm to 6:00am.

President Yahya Khan announced that a meeting of political leaders would be held on March 10.

This was announced from the President Bhaban in Rawalpindi. It was also said that the national parliamentary assembly would be held within two weeks of the meeting.

Bangabandhu instantly rejected the invitation by Yahya.

"If you do not want a democratically elected government, then you can form your own government. We will form the government of Bangladesh," Bangabandhu said.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina enjoys a light moment with Alayna, the daughter of Bangladesh cricketer Shakib Al Hasan, at the Gono Bhaban yesterday. The star all-rounder and his family were invited to the PM's official residence for a visit.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Vietnam keen to boost ties with Bangladesh

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Vietnam and Bangladesh also share common positions on various regional and international issues, and are working closely and supporting each other at international forums and the United Nations, he added.

The high level visit from Vietnam is taking place after a long gap since the tour of then president Tran Duc Luong to Bangladesh in 2004. Dhaka is all set to welcome the Vietnamese president who is scheduled to arrive here at 4:00pm tomorrow from New Delhi.

The exclusive interview was based on a set of questions sent to the president's office in Hanoi through the Vietnam embassy in Bangladesh.

About the prospective areas that Vietnam could expand cooperation with Bangladesh, Tran Dai Quang said Bangladesh is a nation with a long history and endowed with many cultural heritages.

The country has a favourable geography, young population and a potential market, and is a success story in poverty reduction, the promotion of social equality and justice and sustained economic growth, he said.

Bangladesh is realising the goal of graduating to the group of middle-income countries with a view to becoming a digitalised and technologically advanced country. Vietnam can learn from Bangladesh's success in a number of areas, such as microcredit programme and education policies,

the president observed.

"The two countries share many similarities in economic, cultural and social background, and are located at two vital locations in South East Asia and South Asia respectively, and are the bridge between the Asia-Pacific and the South Asia-Indian Ocean regions."

On economic, trade and investment cooperation, he said the two countries could work towards furthering the growth of two-way trade and investment.

"We should enable the trade in the commodities in which each side has an advantage, and enable the business community to strengthen engagement, information sharing and market connectivity. Air connectivity is also a possible area to promote the flow of investment, trade and tourism."

The president hoped to strengthen investment in Bangladesh, especially in potential areas for cooperation such as telecommunication, information technology, agriculture, food processing, textile, oil and gas, consumer goods, infrastructure development and services.

About agriculture, animal husbandry and aquaculture sectors, Tran Dai Quang said the two countries should continue to step up complementary cooperation. The two sides should look into forming joint ventures, associations, production chains, and apply advanced technology in cultivation and husbandry, produc-

tion and preservation to generate greater export value.

On education and training, the president said his country welcome Bangladesh sending officials and students to Vietnam to study and exchange experience on administrative management, economic development, agriculture, aquaculture and environmental management.

"We welcome the close cooperation between the Vietnamese National Academy of Public Administration and the Bangladesh Public Administration Training Center on training and professional capacity building for Bangladeshi public servants in Vietnam."

On defence and security, he said the two countries needed to further look into each other's capacity and need for cooperation. In the short term this means logistics, military medicine and participation in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations.

"Our two sides should also strengthen information sharing, experience exchange and cooperation in combating organised and transnational crime and international terrorism, among others, to ensure peace and security in the region and the world," he said.

"It is our desire and belief that our two countries' competent authorities will be able to tap into the above-mentioned potentials and strengths in seeking suitable measures to expand, enhance and deepen our bilateral

relations, so as to live up to the aspirations and interests of our two countries' leaders and people," said the president.

People-to-people and cultural exchanges have been also continually strengthened, said Tran Dai Quang, adding that he was deeply moved to learn that recently (in June 2017) the book "Uncle Ho Writing His Will" was translated into Bengali. "This is indeed an expression of the deep affection of the people of Bangladesh towards president Ho Chi Minh."

It may be mentioned that Vietnam was among the first countries to recognise independent Bangladesh in 1971. Bangladesh was also one of the first Asian countries to recognise and establish diplomatic relations with the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam immediately after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords.

The two countries established diplomatic relations on February 17, 1973. Since then, the bilateral friendship and cooperation have been enhanced in a wide range of areas, especially economy and trade.

Former prime minister Khaleda Zia was the first Bangladeshi head of government to visit Vietnam in May 2004.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina toured the country in November 2012, President Abdul Hamid in August 2015 and Jatiya Sangshad Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury in July last year.

Curious case of GMG loan

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GMG's affairs with Sonali Bank is intriguing, and a classic example of how to twist a bank's arm with court orders.

Since the company took the loan in 1998, it did not bother to pay regular instalments and became a defaulter.

Then it found a way to regularise its loan in 2013 as the government offered to reschedule loans of companies affected by the political turmoil of the time that saw widespread violence and blockade.

GMG applied for rescheduling under this privilege although the airlines had ceased operation about a year before the political situation turned volatile. For unknown reasons, Bangladesh Bank allowed the company this privilege.

Happy with a new lease of life, GMG

again did not bother to pay instalments regularly.

But Salman had a few problems. One of his prime pieces of land in Dhanmondi, on which Beximco's corporate office is built, was mortgaged for the loan. And Salman is the chairman of IFIC Bank, so if he became a loan defaulter, he would lose the chair.

So GMG filed a writ with the High Court in April 2016 to keep its account as non-defaulter or regular. It obtained an order in its favour.

But the bank wanted its money back and put Salman's mortgaged land on auction. GMG again filed a writ to block the auction and was successful.

GMG also got a court order in 2017 allowing it to pay back the loan in 10 years at quarterly instalments. But the

bank through another court order stopped it.

The airlines then took a different route and offered the bank loan repayment in eight years and sought waiver of all interest. This time it also made a down payment of Tk 33 crore.

The bank partially accepted the offer and waived Tk 57 crore in interest, and asked GMG to pay the rest Tk 190 crore in one and a half years.

GMG sat silent on the offer. Bank officials called the airlines over the phone and company officials verbally informed the bank that the offer was unacceptable.

The airlines then went to court again and got another stay order to keep its accounts regular.

Responding to an email by The Daily

Star, GMG said Sonali Bank rescheduled the loan only for one and a half years with waiver of partial interest of Tk 57 crore. In view of the fact that GMG is closed, it is not possible for it to repay within such a short time.

The company claimed that it was not a wilful defaulter, and had defaulted due to business reasons beyond its control.

Obayed Ullah Al Masud, managing director of Sonali Bank, said the board decided not to provide any more services to the defaulter.

"We will recover the loan through legal process," he said.

The bank appointed a lawyer to have vacated the stay order that kept GMG's account regular. A hearing on the case is scheduled for tomorrow, he said.

Khondkar Ibrahim Khaled, a former

Hasina visits Khulna today

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will visit Khulna today to join the 58th Convention of the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB).

Hasina, also the Awami League president, will address a public meeting, organised by Khulna AL, at the Circuit House Maidan in the afternoon.

She will open 47 development projects and lay the foundation stones of 52 others.

Bangladesh

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Significantly, India is not a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which controls global nuclear commerce, and hence cannot participate directly in construction of atomic power reactors. India is also not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty which New Delhi considers as "discriminatory".

Construction of the Rooppur nuclear power plant will consist of two power units with a capacity of 1,200 MW each. The two units is planned to be commissioned in 2023 and 2024.

The MoU set a framework for the interaction between the Russian contractor and experts from India and Bangladesh in the implementation of works related to the project, Rosatom said.

"The parties, in particular, will cooperate in the field of personnel training, exchange of experience and consulting support. Indian companies can be involved in construction and installation works, the supply of materials and equipment of a non-critical category in the interests of the project," the statement said.

Spassky described the signing of the MoU as a "landmark event" for the nuclear industry as a whole.

"We are confident that this is the first step toward the formation of a new, forward-looking cooperation agenda in the region [South Asia]," he said.

Russia is building the Rooppur nuclear power plant on "turnkey" basis. The general construction contractor is JSC Atomstroyexport (part of the engineering division of Rosatom). The scope of work includes design, production and supply of equipment, construction, installation, start-up and commissioning, the statement said.

In 2015-2016, the General Contractor carried out the preliminary work at the construction site, prepared operating documentation, worked out the documents to justify licences for siting and constructing the power units.

On November 30 last year, the ceremony of pouring the "first concrete" into the foundation of the reactor compartment of the first power unit took place.

According to Rosatom, India, Bangladesh and Russia on Thursday signed an agreement to allow Indian firms in construction and installation works in the "non-critical" category for the Rooppur nuclear power plant project.

Tougher law to deal with drug cases

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Currently, the maximum punishment in yaba-related cases is 15 years of imprisonment.

The new move aims at stopping the yaba menace in the country, said DNC officials.

The government is planning to do away with the current anti-narcotics law -- Narcotics Control Act 1990 -- and have a "time befitting new law" passed in parliament to fight narcotics in a better way, DNC Director General Jamal Uddin Ahmed told The Daily Star.

"We are trying to formulate a tougher law where death penalty is maximum punishment in yaba-related cases.

"In the existing law, there is no scope for detaining the godfathers of the illegal drug trade. We have made way for such scopes incorporating different provisions in it [the draft law]," he said.

The draft law also proposes harsher punishment for cases related to some other drugs.

AAM Hafizur Rahman, a DNC addi-

tional director who was involved in the formation of the draft, told The Daily Star, "Apart from naming the yaba making ingredients and chemicals, the draft law also addressed all the possible sources which may be used for yaba production in the future."

Experts and rights activists, however, said all the stakeholders, especially the law enforcers, should rather play their roles properly for preventing the smuggling of drugs into the country or their spread across it.

Otherwise, they said, harsher punishments would yield no good results.

"We can't get rid of narcotics, especially yaba, without proper application of law," said Nur Khan Liton, a human rights activist.

He also cautioned that misuses of laws often rise with making punishments harsher.

"On many occasions, members of

police use narcotics as a means of amassing money from people illegally. In many

cases, they do that by putting various drugs, including yaba pills, in people's pockets," he said.

The pace of yaba smuggling into the country and the rapid increase in its use, particularly among the youth, is alarming, according to experts.

The US National Drug Intelligence Centre says yaba can cause rapid heart rate, increased blood pressure, and damage to the small blood vessels in the brain that can lead to stroke.

Chronic use can result in inflammation of the heart lining. Overdoses can cause elevated body temperature, convulsions, and death.

Recently, the DNC sent the draft law to the home ministry for scrutiny. The proposed law is likely to be discussed in an inter-ministerial meeting on March 13.

The proposed law also has strict provisions for bringing the financier and patroniser of illegal drug trade to book.

"If any person or persons or institutions committed offence under the law by

investing money or supplying money or give patronisation, he or she would be held guilty under the specific section of the law and fined Tk 1 crore, in default of which he or she would serve five years in prison," says the draft.

Besides, the proposed law defined Shisha as a drug. Shisha is mixture of essences of caramel-mixed fruit slices that contains nicotine more than 0.2 percent, the draft law defined.

"We have information that yaba and its ingredients and some other drugs are being used in the Shisha lounge, but we cannot carry out drive as the existing law does not permit it. We will launch raids against Shisha bars once the new law is passed," said a top DNC official.

The draft law will also allow officials concerned to carry out X-ray, ultrasonography, endoscopy and colonoscopy of suspects, if they believe the suspects may have hidden drug inside any parts of their bodies.

Trump aide

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Siddique and Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque during her visit.

US Ambassador in Dhaka Marcia Bernicat has said the US administration has been "very vocal and critical" about Myanmar over the Rohingya issue.

She said the US administration was very strongly behind Bangladesh.

The diplomat on Wednesday said the Rohingya crisis was not losing world attention as the international media were still giving focus and good coverage on the matter. "I don't think international attention and support are going to fade regarding the Rohingya issue."

She said her government and the international community were looking for ways to help improve the situation and ensure the safe return of Rohingyas to their homes in Myanmar.

"Their [Rohingyas] desire is consistent that they want to go to their homes and their homes are in Myanmar. The

world is working now to ensure their safe return in a dignified manner."

Bangladesh and all its friends were working to mount pressure on Myanmar to resolve the problem and create a situation so that Rohingyas could go to their homes, the US envoy added.

During his visit to Washington, Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque met Lisa Curtis on February 16. The two discussed bilateral, regional and global security issues.

Lisa conveyed President Trump's deep appreciation for Bangladesh for hosting more than a million Rohingyas forcibly displaced from Myanmar.

She was a senior research fellow on South Asia in The Heritage Foundation before joining the White House where she used to focus on US national security interests and regional geopolitics as senior research fellow on South Asia.