



Newly-appointed Bangladesh High Commissioner to the UK Saida Muna Tasneem shakes hands with UK Minister of State for Asia and the Pacific Mark Field during a courtesy call at his office in London on Thursday.

COURTESY: BANGLADESH HIGH COMMISSION, LONDON

Pvt banks

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Nazrul Islam Mazumder, chairman of the BAB, presided over the meeting, held at the BAB office in the city. Most of the chairmen and managing directors of private banks attended it.

The two organisations have taken the decision as part of instructions given by Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal on Thursday.

Kamal asked the BAB leaders to take initiative to halt further rise of defaulted loans in the banking sector.

After getting the working paper, the BAB and ABB will sit together again to finalise the strategies to halt the upward trend of non-performing loans (NPL) in the banking sector. The final strategic paper will be submitted to the finance minister to take action on the issue.

ABB chief Rahman told the Daily Star yesterday that they had discussed different issues at the meeting to improve the financial health of banks.

As of September last year, NPL accounts for 11.45 percent of the banking sector's total loans, according to Bangladesh Bank data.

In terms of amount, it stood at Tk 99,370 crore -- the largest yet in the country's history.

Taken up

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He also suggested that the government consult other South Asian countries who share rivers with Bangladesh and urged Bangladeshi lawmakers to have a political good-will to implement the plan.

On September 4 last year, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at a meeting of the National Economic Council approved the century-long Delta Plan 2100, prepared by the General Economics Division (GED) of the planning ministry.

The government has planned at least 80 projects and decided to spend about \$37 billion by 2031 for the implementation of the scheme.

After the approval came, environmentalists and climate experts alleged that the plan was not taken up on the basis of adequate studies and would not be helpful in the long run.

Speakers at yesterday's programme raised the same issue and the NRCC chief echoed their views.

But the government has been dismissing the objections since the beginning.

Noted climate expert and Brac University's Prof Emeritus Ainun Nishat said many old government projects were included in the delta plan which needed revision.

He also said the government still believed water is necessary "only for human beings". But it has to think about other living beings while initiating the scheme.

Later in the afternoon, the two-day conference ended with the adaptation of a proposal with 38 recommendations mostly focusing on the modification of the delta plan through studies and consultation with experts in this sector.

The proposal also recommended that transparency and accountability were ensured in all aspects of the scheme by the government.

Several researchers, academicians, environmentalists and civil society representatives from home and abroad, including from India, Nepal and the US, took part in the programme where about 92 research papers were presented in different sessions.

Bapa President Prof Abdullah Abu Sayeed, also the founder of Bishwo Shahitto Kendro, noted rights activist and green activist Sultana Kamal, and BEN Founder Nazrul Islam, among others, spoke on the concluding day of the conference.

PROTEST AT ARREST

1 killed in N'ganj as police 'shoot at agitators'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

One person was killed and 20 others injured as police allegedly opened fire at a crowd protesting the arrest of two people from a restaurant at Modonpur bus stand area in Narayanganj's Bandar Upazila.

The dead was identified as Ashiqur Rahman, 25, a garment worker and resident of Bandar upazila, eyewitnesses said.

According to locals, around six to seven police officers entered the Dreamland Restaurant near the area and detained Nur Nabi and Rifat, both aged between 22 and 25, around 6:30pm.

Both of them were ruling party activists, they said.

Soon after they were detained,

locals and other party members protested and lay a siege on the restaurant.

They also engaged in a scuffle to take back the two men from police custody, Nurat Jahan, an eyewitness, told this correspondent.

At one stage, police fired several shots to disperse the crowd, another eyewitness claimed.

Officer-in-Charge of Bandar Police Station Azharul Islam told The Daily Star that police went to the restaurant to arrest Nabi and Rifat, against whom arrest warrants for extortion charges had been issued. He also said police fired blank shots to disperse people.

Superintendent of Police in Narayanganj Harun-or-Rashid said he was not aware of any such casualty and was collecting information on the incident.

Congo ruling coalition wins legislative majority

REUTERS, Kinshasa

Outgoing Democratic Republic of Congo President Joseph Kabila's ruling coalition won a majority in legislative elections, a coalition official said on Saturday, despite opposition leader Felix Tshisekedi's win in the presidential vote the same day.

The result will undercut Tshisekedi's ability to deliver on campaign promises to make a break with the Kabila era and fuel suspicions that his victory, announced on Thursday, came through a backroom deal that will preserve Kabila's influence over important ministries and the security forces.

Kabila is due to step down in the coming days after 18 years in power, marking Congo's first democratic transfer of power in 59 years of independence. But Kabila has signalled that he intends to remain involved in politics and might run for president in 2023 when term limits no longer apply.

Under the constitution, the parliamentary majority enjoys significant powers and the president must appoint his prime minister from its ranks.

The prime minister, in turn, must countersign presidential orders appointing or dismissing military chiefs, judges and heads of state-owned enterprises.

Adam Chalwe, a national secretary for Kabila's PPRD party, the biggest within the FCC coalition, told Reuters that results from the individual races announced by the electoral commission (CENI) early Saturday morning showed FCC candidates taking more than 300 out of 500 seats in the National Assembly.

Reuters was not immediately able to confirm that independently.

Parties in the FCC coalition accounted for about 350 seats in the previous legislature.

The coalition's presidential candidate in the Dec. 30 election, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, finished a distant third with 24 percent of the vote. Pre-election polling had shown the FCC lagging behind opposition parties in legislative races.

On Saturday, the presidential runner-up Martin Fayulu plans to file a formal fraud complaint with Congo's highest court. Fayulu says he won a landslide victory with more than 60 percent of votes and accuses Tshisekedi of striking a deal with Kabila to be declared the winner.

Tshisekedi's camp denies there was any deal and says meetings it held with Kabila's representatives after the election were aimed solely at ensuring a peaceful transfer of power.

But the disputed outcome threatens to reawaken violence in the huge and tumultuous nation where millions have died during civil wars since the 1990s.

Three killed as Ottawa bus crashes into bus shelter

REUTERS, Ottawa

Three people were killed and nearly two dozen were injured on Friday when a double-decker bus struck a bus shelter in the Canadian capital of Ottawa during rush hour, city officials said.

Part of the upper right side of the bus was shorn off in the collision, which happened shortly before 4 p.m. ET (2100 GMT) at a busy transit station in the west end of the city.

"It is with deep sadness that I report there were three confirmed casualties, two of which were on the bus and one that was on the platform," Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson told reporters at a news conference late on Friday.

Watson also said that 23 people were injured in the collision, some very seriously, and taken to hospital. The Ottawa Hospital confirmed on Twitter that it had received nine patients in critical condition from the crash.

Ottawa police chief Charles Bordeleau said the bus driver was arrested at the scene and taken in for questioning, but he declined to provide further details.

UK minister lauds Hasina for support to Rohingyas

Newly appointed Bangladesh high commissioner to UK meets him in London

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Appreciating Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's humanitarian support to the Rohingyas, UK's Minister of State for Asia and the Pacific Mark Field underlined the need for the refugees' voluntary, dignified and sustainable return to Myanmar involving UN agencies.

He said this while receiving the newly-appointed Bangladesh High Commissioner to the UK Saida Muna Tasneem at his office in London on Thursday.

Tasneem reassured the UK that Hasina in her new term would continue to uphold the "principles of non-refoulement" and "humanitarianism" and ensure a voluntary, safe and sustainable return of forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals that fled to Bangladesh to escape persecutions in Myanmar.

Field reiterated that the UK would continue to play its leadership role in the UN Security Council and bilaterally with Bangladesh in ensuring prevention of human rights violations and alleged genocide of the Rohingyas.

He commended Bangladesh for its leadership role in UN Peacekeeping and recognised the sacrifice made by fallen peacekeepers from Bangladesh for global peace.

Field said the UK would be more focused on strengthening its trade, and economic and security cooperation with Bangladesh in the days to come.

He lauded Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for including younger generation of politicians in her new cabinet.

Tasneem said Bangladesh and PM Hasina have a renewed commitment to take Bangladesh-UK relations to a new level of strategic and economic partnership, and expressed her own resolve to unfold new areas of mutually beneficial cooperation in Bangladesh-UK relations.

Tax cuts support employment, economic stability: China PM

REUTERS, Shanghai

China's plans for tax cuts targeting smaller companies will help to support employment and economic stability, and will expand the country's tax base over the long term, Premier Li Keqiang was quoted as saying on Saturday.

"Implementing tax cuts for small and micro enterprises is mainly to support employment," Li said in comments posted on the Chinese government's website.

Developing and strengthening small companies is linked to economic stability and stable employment, he said.

"Looking at the long term, this will continue to expand the tax base, conserve tax resources and ultimately achieve wins for mass employment, corporate profits and fiscal revenues," he was quoted as saying, referring to the corporate tax cuts.

Li's comments come amid growing official concern over China's slowing economic growth and its impact on the labour market.

Chinese authorities plan to set a lower economic growth target of 6 to 6.5 percent in 2019, compared with "around" 6.5 percent in 2018, sources told Reuters, as weakening domestic demand and a damaging trade war with the United States drag on business activity and consumer confidence.

Analysts expect that China's economy grew around 6.6 percent last year, its slowest pace since 1990, and it is expected to cool further in coming months before a slew of support measures start to kick in.

"The bottom line for the policymakers is social stability, which is crucially tied to the unemployment rate and job creation," analysts at BoAML said in a recent note. "With U.S.-China trade risks still looming large, we believe policymakers would not hesitate to take pre-emptive measures to stabilize expectations on job stability."

More growth boosting steps are expected this year as policymakers seek to avert the risk of a sharper slowdown.

China's State Council, or cabinet, said on Jan. 9 that it would further reduce taxes for smaller companies. On Friday, Finance Minister Liu Kun said authorities would step up tax and fee cuts to lower corporate burdens.

Road transport act

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general secretary of the ruling Awami League.

He added that the authorities concerned have been directed to boost their drives.

Actions would be taken under the act against the accused, be it the owner or driver, he stressed.

The act has not yet taken effect because the government had been doing only the "routine tasks" before the election, he said. Now that the government has been re-elected, it will gain momentum.

Asked when the act would come into action, Quader said, "From right now. Has the act mentioned that it would come into force after six months?"

As a reporter pointed out that the government has to issue a gazette notification first, Quader said, "Gazette has already been issued. You don't know. Why are you talking without knowing [about it]?"

The reporter then told him that the government issued a gazette after the law was enacted, but no gazette was issued mentioning when it would take effect.

"Since the gazette was issued after enacting the law, there is no problem in making the act come into force. There is no necessity to issue a further

gazette to make the law come into force," the minister claimed.

In November last year, Nazrul Islam, secretary of road transport and highway division, told The Daily Star that the act could not take effect as officials had not been able to prepare its rules.

He added that the BRTA was asked to frame the rules.

The BRTA later requested the ministry to hire a consultant instead and currently conducts its mobile courts as per the Motor Vehicles Ordinance-1983, said an official.

Asked for his opinion yesterday, Supreme Court lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua said the government has to issue a gazette notification as per the act before enforcing the law.

"At least a one page gazette must be issued," said Jyotirmoy, also vice chairman of the NGO, Road Safety Foundation.

In March 2017, the cabinet approved in principle the Road Transport Act. But the proposed act remained shelved at the law ministry for over a year amid opposition from transport workers and owners.

The cabinet and subsequently the parliament passed the law after last year's widespread protests for road safety.

Fog disrupts

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were seen stuck in long queue at Paturia when the services resumed around 9:00am. Some 100 vehicles were also lined up on the Daulatdia side. It took another two hours to return the vehicle movement to normalcy.

Mahmud Hasan, who was heading to Magura from Dhaka, said it was not a new experience.

"We have been undergoing the sufferings for long, especially during the winter months, and now we have taken it for granted," he added.

"Being stuck in jam for hours is a misery. And it gets worse when there is no room for breastfeeding and the number of toilets for women is inadequate and not fit to be used," said another passenger Sohrab Hossain, who was going to Jhenidah with his family members.

Talking to The Daily Star, the passengers and staff of the stranded vehicles urged the government to construct a bridge over the river Padma between Paturia and Daulatdia points to reduce their hardship.

Meanwhile, ferry services were suspended on Shimulia-Kathalbari route for six hours since 4:00am.

Six ferries with more than a thousand passengers on board got stuck in the Padma for over six hours due to haze, while 10 other ferries were stuck on both the sides.

Besides, around 400 vehicles, mostly goods-laden trucks, covered van and small vehicles, were stranded due to suspension of ferry services, said Mehedi Hasan, terminal assistant at BIWTC's Shimulia Ferry Ghat.

Our Manikganj and Munshiganj correspondents contributed to the story.

It's against constitution

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Educating all is necessary for nation building, and Islam never prohibits anyone from receiving the highest education maintaining decency, said the acclaimed Islamic scholar.

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad President Ayesha Khanom said she wants to know from all -- the government high-ups, politicians and intellectuals -- if Shafi's statement is consistent with the state policy for women development and empowerment.

"The countrymen very well know our reaction. I rather want to know how the government views this statement."

Telecom and ICT Minister Mustafa Jabbar at a programme in the capital yesterday countering Shafi's comment said it is no longer possible to confine girls to their homes.

The prime minister has already brought them out for education and a huge number of them are engaged in development activities, he added.

Deputy Minister for Education Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury Nowfel, at a view-exchange meeting in Chattogram said it was Shafi's "personal opinion".

There is no scope to accept that comment as it is "discriminatory" and "inconsistent with the state policy", he added.

"Everyone should keep in mind that all the citizens have been guaranteed equal rights by our constitution. We should not make any discriminatory remark."

Campaign for Popular Education

Executive Director Rasheda K Choudhury said Shafi's statement was totally reactionary and it "denies women development and empowerment".

"Are they also denying women leadership?" she asked.

"It is necessary to identify the motive behind the comments," she said, adding such a comment can incite fanaticism among countrymen.

"We should demand a statement from our political leaders including the prime minister to end this kind of negative comments against women."

Dhaka University Women and Gender Studies Professor Tania Haque said Shafi's comment reflects the existing patriarchal attitude in the society. "Such comments will create obstacles to women education and empowerment," she said.

"Politicians should cut ties with these people if they really want women empowerment and progress."

Ruling alliance component Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal's President Hasanul Haque Inu and General Secretary Shirin Akter in a statement condemned Shafi's comment.

Besides, Samajtantrik Mahila Forum and Samajtantrik Chhatra Front in separate statements demanded steps against Shafi for his "anti-constitutional" comment.

The constitution says the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of sex and women shall have equal rights as men in all spheres of the state and public life, they added.

Govt shutdown

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Only minutes earlier, powerful Republican ally Senator Lindsey Graham tweeted after talks with Trump: "Mr. President, Declare a national emergency NOW."

It was not clear what made Trump change course.

But Trump himself acknowledged in the White House meeting that an attempt to claim emergency powers would likely end up in legal battles going all the way to the Supreme Court.

Opponents say that a unilateral move by the president over the sensitive border issue would be constitutional overreach and set a dangerous precedent in similar controversies.

The standoff has turned into a test of political edge, particularly for Trump, who came into office boasting of his deal making powers and making an aggressive border policy the keystone of his nationalist agenda.

Democrats, meanwhile, seem determined at all costs to prevent a president who relishes campaign rally chants of "build the wall!" from getting a win.

Both Democrats and Republicans agree that the US-Mexican frontier presents major challenges, ranging from the hyper-violent Mexican drug trade to the plight of asylum seekers and poor migrants seeking new lives in the world's richest country.

There's also little debate that border walls are needed: about a third of the frontier is already fenced off.

But Trump has turned his single-

minded push for more walls into a political crusade seen by opponents as a stunt to stoke xenophobia in his right-wing voter base, while wilfully ignoring the border's complex realities.

For Trump, who visited the Texas border with Mexico on Thursday, the border situation amounts to an invasion by criminals that can only be solved by more walls.

"We have a country that's under siege," he told the local officials in the White House.

Some studies show that illegal immigrants generally commit fewer crimes than people born in the United States, although not everyone agrees on this.

More certain is that while narcotics do enter the country across remote sections of the border, most are sneaked through heavily guarded checkpoints in vehicles, the government's own Drug Enforcement Administration said in a 2017 report.

It said that most smuggling is done "through US ports of entry (POEs) in passenger vehicles with concealed compartments or commingled with legitimate goods on tractor trailers."

Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives and a key figure in opposing Trump's agenda, said money should be spent in many areas of border security, but not on walls.

"We need to look at the facts," she said.

But Trump accused the Democrats of only wanting to score points against him with a view to the 2020 presidential elections.