

Settle problems through talks

PM urges Muslim countries

UNB, Dhaka

Stressing the importance of Muslim countries' unity, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the Muslim countries should solve their problems, if any, through talks.

"The Muslim Ummah should remain together ... if there's any problem among themselves, that can be solved through discussions," she said.

Hasina made the comment when newly appointed Iranian Ambassador Mohammad Reza Nafar met her at her office.

PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim briefed reporters after the meeting.

He said the PM mentioned that it is the people who suffer if there is any conflict among Muslim countries.

Hasina said the government has reduced the poverty level in Bangladesh to 21 percent and has a target to reduce it by 4-5 percent further in near future.

She said the development policy of her government is centred on the rural level.

Talking about the country's existing religious harmony, Hasina said Bangladesh has this harmony as every person here participate in all religious festivals.

Terming Iranian people coura-

geous, she highly appreciated their economic progress.

Welcoming the new Iranian ambassador to Bangladesh, she assured him of her all-out cooperation during his tenure here.

Hasina also conveyed her regards to the Iranian president through the envoy and recalled her visits to Iran in 1997 and 2012.

Ambassador Nafar highly greeted the landslide victory of Awami League in the recent national election and described Hasina as a wise and prudent prime minister of Bangladesh. The people of Iran are very much fond of her, he added.

He mentioned that the religious and cultural bonds between Bangladesh and Iran are very excellent and hoped to move that forward further during his tenure in Bangladesh. "Our cooperation at the regional and international level is very good; cultural relation is excellent, political relation is at the good level."

But he emphasised on enhancing the volume of bilateral trade, which is \$135 million. "It's not satisfactory at the moment."

The diplomat also mentioned that Iran is moving forward despite sanctions by some western countries.

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina hands over books on Bangabandhu to newly appointed Iranian Ambassador in Dhaka Mohammad Reza Nafar during his visit to the Prime Minister's Office yesterday.

PHOTO: PMO

5G licence next year

Says BTRC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The telecom regulator has started its initial preparations for awarding licences to carriers for 5G mobile data service in 2020, said Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) yesterday.

In a meeting with the Telecom Reporters' Network, BTRC Commissioner for Spectrum Management Md Aminul Hassan said along with the carriers, the BTRC would have to do a lot of work this year to ensure smooth 5G service in 2020.

"We've asked all mobile network operators to give presentation regarding 5G ..."

At the meeting, BTRC's acting chairman Md Jahurul Haque said in July last year Robi tested 5G service and had achieved their expected high-speed data transmission.

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1,300 arrived

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India, which is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, arrested 230 Rohingyas in 2018 -- the most in years as Hindu hardliners called for the displaced Muslims to be deported en masse.

The round-ups in India, and fear of deportation to Myanmar, have driven even more of the stateless Muslims into Bangladesh, where a million Rohingyas live in giant refugee camps in the country's southeast.

Nayana Bose, a spokeswoman for the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), which includes UN agencies and other foreign humanitarian organisations, said the pace of new arrivals had escalated since January 3.

"Some 1,300 individuals from 300 families have arrived from India to Bangladesh until today," she told AFP.

The new arrivals were being housed in a UN transit centre, she added.

UNHCR spokesman Firas Al-Khateeb said the UN refugee agency was "aware of the situation".

Those crossing the border in recent weeks have been detained by police and sent to Cox's Bazar, a southern district home to the world's largest refugee camps.

Some 40,000 Rohingyas have been living in India. Police said those who arrived were living in India for years.

Rohingyas for decades have faced persecution and pogroms in Myanmar, which refuses to recognise them as citizens and falsely labels them "Bengali" illegal immigrants.

They were concentrated in Rakhine state, the epicentre of a brutal Myanmar army offensive in August 2017 that UN investigators described as genocidal in intent.

At least 720,000 Rohingyas fled the bloody crackdown and entered Bangladesh to join some 300,000 already living in the camps.

Amnesty International, among other rights groups, has blasted India for forcibly repatriating the Rohingyas to Myanmar when persecution in Rakhine is ongoing.

Dozens of Rohingyas were also deported from Saudi Arabia to Bangladesh last week. They were arrested for illegally using Bangladeshi passports to travel to the kingdom.

May survives

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political relations with the rest of the world.

She has promised to return to parliament on Monday with an alternative Brexit strategy devised through cross-party talks with the opposition.

There is now an assumption among many European diplomats that Brexit will have to be delayed to avoid a potentially catastrophic "no-deal" breakup.

May notably refused to rule out the idea when quizzed about it in parliament earlier yesterday.

May survived yesterday thanks to the support of members of her Conservative Party and ruling coalition Northern Irish allies in the Democratic Union Party.

But more than a third of the Conservatives and all 10 DUP members of parliament voted against her Brexit arrangements on Tuesday -- each for their own reason.

Despite the win, May will have to

tread carefully as she tries to win over opposition lawmakers -- many of whom want to remain in the EU -- while also attempting to appease more hardened Brexit-backing coalition partners.

During a grilling in parliament earlier yesterday, May repeated two key principles -- limiting migration and pursuing an independent trade policy -- which would rule out Labour hopes of membership of an EU customs union or its single market.

But she also hinted at the possibility of delaying Brexit.

May said the EU would allow this "if it was clear that there was a plan towards moving towards an agreed deal".

The Times newspaper yesterday reported that EU officials are examining plans to delay Brexit until 2020 after Germany and France indicated their willingness to extend withdrawal negotiations amid British political turmoil.

All 27 EU leaders would have to sign off a Brexit date postponement in case May requests one -- something she has until now refused to do.

EU officials have said extending the negotiating period could be possible until the newly-elected European Parliament meets in June.

EU leaders have repeatedly said they will not reopen the draft withdrawal agreement sealed at a special Brussels summit in December.

French President Emmanuel Macron suggested after May's fiasco on Tuesday that the EU might be willing to tweak a few minor points -- but only if they did not alter the bloc's existing position on trade and borders.

"Maybe we'll make improvements on one or two things, but I don't really think so because we've reached the maximum of what we could do with the deal," the French leader said.

"We won't, just to solve Britain's domestic political issues, stop defending European interests."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel added: "We still have time to negotiate but we're now waiting on what the prime minister proposes."

And Irish Prime Leo Varadkar added "that if the United Kingdom were to evolve from its red lines on the customs union and on the single market, that the European Union could evolve also."

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn opened yesterday's debate by telling May she was leading a "zombie government" whose Brexit agreement was "officially dead".

May must "do the right thing and resign," said Corbyn.

But there is still no consensus in parliament on how to proceed and May called an election "the worst thing we could do".

"It would deepen division when we need unity, it would bring chaos when we need certainty and it would bring delay when we need to move forward," May argued.

Experts wary of Brexit impact

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hard, economists and exporters said.

"Of course, there will be a bad impact on shipments of goods from Bangladesh if the uncertainty over Brexit deal lasts long," said Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a leading think-tank.

The uncertainty over the Brexit deal will slow economic growth in the UK. At the same time, import costs will go up.

As a result, Britons will squeeze the limit of their expenditure, said the CPD fellow. "So the overall demand side will be affected due to the uncertainty."

In February last year, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that the UK needs to find ways to make its economy more efficient and that Brexit had already begun hurting the economy.

"Higher prices, caused by a weaker pound, have limited increases in people's spending, and uncertainty about the future relationship with the EU has kept some business investments on hold," the IMF said in its annual report on the British economy, the CNBC

reported on February 15 last year.

In its baseline scenario, the IMF estimated a 40 percent reduction in net exports of financial services to the European Union, given the government's decision to exit the single market -- the region where goods, people and services move freely in Europe.

If that really happens, Bangladesh's export to the UK will be affected beyond imagination, said Mustafizur.

Currently, over 240 British companies have operations in energy, power generation, oil and gas and financial services in Bangladesh.

According to Bangladesh Bank data, the UK was the second largest investor in Bangladesh in 2016-17, with FDI stock of \$1.6 billion, the CPD said in a recent study.

The major share of this was in banking (53.9 percent), textile and apparels (15.9 percent), and food industry (11.5 percent).

But the fall in the value of British pound could adversely affect UK investment in Bangladesh, as it will make local procurement costly in GBP terms, the CPD said.

On several occasions, the British

government said Bangladesh's exports to the UK would continue to enjoy duty-free benefits even after Brexit came into effect, and so trade would grow even more.

But Mustafizur said the uncertainty over the Brexit deal will affect British investment in Bangladesh while the remittance flow from the nearly 1 million Bangladesh-born British will decline.

And because Britain will likely be more conservative on labour migration from both outside and inside the EU, labour migration from Bangladesh will also take a hit, he added.

"So the government needs to set up a taskforce to assess the losses and to suggest the future action plans so that the UK market potentials remained unaffected from Brexit deal," the economist added.

In fiscal 2017-18, shipments of goods from Bangladesh to the UK rose by 11.76 percent year-on-year to \$3.99 billion, according to the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB).

During the same period, only apparel export to the UK grew by 12.72 percent year-on-year to \$3.72 billion.

"If the uncertainty prolongs, our exports to the UK will be affected," said Zahid Hussain, chief economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office.

"Whatever the deal, we need to be prepared as the UK is our third largest export destination," he added.

Siddiqur Rahman, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, also said apparel exports to the UK might be affected if the deal hit the UK economy.

SM Jahangir Hossain, president of Bangladesh Fruits, Vegetables and Allied Products Exporter's Association, said that in the short-term there was no possibility of any negative impact on vegetable export to the UK. It's another matter if the uncertainty lasts long.

The UK is a major destination for shipment of vegetables and fruits because of the nearly 1 million non-resident Bangladeshis living there.

Contacted, Additional Commerce Secretary Shafiqul Islam said they were yet to form a taskforce to assess the impact of the Brexit deal on Bangladesh.

"But the UK remains an important market for Bangladesh," he added.

GATCO GRAFT CASE

Khaleda skips hearing for sickness

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Despite facing a production warrant, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia did not appear before court during the hearing of Gatco graft case yesterday as she developed a boil on her leg.

Judge Abu Syed Diljar Hossain of the Special Judge Court-3 of Dhaka set the next hearing date on January 24.

All the accused must appear before the court on that day, the judge said during yesterday's hearing.

Khaleda's lawyer Masud Ahmed Talukder told the court that the jail authorities could not produce Khaleda before the court because of her sickness.

There was no scope for the hearing on charge framing as the accused was absent in the court, Masud said.

The other defence lawyers echoed his remarks in the court.

On the other hand, Anti-Corruption Commission's Public Prosecutor Mosharraf Hossain Kajol told journalists that they were ready for the hearing.

"Seeing Khaleda's delay in appearance, I called the jail authorities over phone. They informed me that Khaleda woke up late and was not ready for going to the court. Then I talked to the doctor about Khaleda's health over phone. The doctor informed me that there is a boil on Khaleda's leg," Kajol added.

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Another ABT man

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briefing at the media centre of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

With Asadullah, four ABT men have so far been arrested in this connection. The three others -- Saimun alias Shahriar, Arafat Siam and Sheikh Abdullah Jayed -- had earlier given confessional statements before magistrates, CTTC officials said.

USAID staff Xulhaz, who used to work as a protocol officer of former US ambassador in Dhaka Dan W Mozena, and his friend Khandoker Mahbub Rabbay Tonoy were hacked to death inside Xulhaz's flat on April 25, 2016.

Five killers, aged between 25 and 28, were seen running away in the footage of a CCTV camera installed about 300 yards from the house.

Monirul said seven militants directly took part in the operation. Posing as couriers, five from the ABT's operational wing entered Xulhaz's house to execute the murder. Two others from its intelligence wing stayed outside.

Three members of the outfit's operational wing are still on the run, he added.

According to CTTC officials, Asadullah, a former Chhatra Shibir activist, got involved in militancy in 2015 and came to Dhaka in January the following year. At a hideout in the city's Uttar Badda, he took training on how to use machetes, guns and kill people.

During an anti-militancy drive at the hideout on February 19, 2016, Asadullah had stabbed then police inspector Bahauddin and fled away with the cop's firearm. Bahauddin identified Asadullah as his attacker seeing his photograph after arrest, Monirul said.

Police said they were hopeful of recovering the firearm.

CTTC officials claimed Asadullah had a close connection with Maj (sacked) Zia who gave him organisational directives using a secret messaging app even on January 6 this year. Zia has been on the run.

Meanwhile, a Dhaka court yesterday granted a three-day remand for Asadullah in the double murder case filed by Xulhaz's brother Minhaz Mannan.

Son of retired madrasa teacher Emdadul Haque in Jhenidah's Maheshpur upazila, Asadullah completed Dakhil (equivalent to SSC) from a local madrasa. Later, he studied at Jashore Polytechnic Institute.

Family members suspected that he was radicalised during his stay in Jashore.

YOUNGER BROTHER 'MISSING'

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Emdadul said his son had left his Jhenidah home in 2014 following an argument with him over democracy. He had been traceless since then.

"About a week days ago, Asadullah contacted my youngest son Abu Zar who went to the capital to meet him. Asadullah took his brother to his house and talked to his mother using Abu Zar's phone. Later, police arrested both of them from the house," Emdadul said over the phone.

He said he had nothing to say about Asadullah's arrest as he took a "wrong path". He, however, demanded release of Abu Zar, claiming him to be innocent.

Emdadul could not give detail about his son's house in Dhaka.

Mohibul Islam Khan, deputy commissioner of CTTC, denied arresting Abu Zar.

Enquired about the family's claim that the two brothers were picked up at the same time, the police official told this correspondent, "Ask his family members to find him out as they are complaining about it."

CEC blasts TIB polls findings

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December 30 polls.

On Tuesday, the TIB in its study titled "Review of Election Process of 11th National Election" said irregularities took place in 47 out of the 50 constituencies it surveyed.

It termed the polls "partially participatory, non-competitive, questionable and faulty" and demanded a judicial inquiry into the reported irregularities.

The anti-graft watchdog said ballot papers stamping took place the night before the election in 33 constituencies, stamping ballots openly after occupying booths in 30 seats on the election day and non-availability of ballot papers in 22 constituencies.

The TIB study found ballot boxes filled-up before polling even began in 20 constituencies; voters forced to cast ballots for a particular symbol in 26

constituencies, casting of fake votes in 41 seats, silence of the administration and law enforcing agencies in 42 seats and obstructing and driving out polling agents in 29 seats.

In the 50 constituencies, not all the polling centres necessarily saw the anomalies. Irregularities happened in one or more centres of a seat, the watchdog said.

"IT IS BASELESS" "We are completely rejecting the TIB report on the election. It is baseless," the CEC told reporters after an orientation programme of the newly appointed Election Commission officials at the Nirbachon Bhaban in the capital yesterday.

The CEC said there was no similarity of the TIB report with those published in newspapers and accounts of other observers on the voting day.

Information provided by the election enquiry committees, executive

magistrates and EC officials and others on the polls also do not match the TIB findings, he said.

The CEC also slammed the TIB's allegation that the EC failed to act neutrally and the role of some polling officers and law enforcement agencies were biased, saying, "The speech is disrespectful ... They should not speak like that."

He said the commission would not take any step against TIB over its report.

"FAIRY TALE" "The TIB has come up with the fairy tale long after the election," Quader told journalists after an extended meeting of Dhaka South City unit Jubo League at AL's central office on the Bangabandhu Avenue.

"The TIB has cooked up so many imaginary and unbelievable stories. The countrymen will give a reply to the report."

He termed the December 30 elec-

tion transparent and excellent.

"Did any agent of BNP and Oikyafront candidates make any objection about the transparency of the election on the voting day?" Quader questioned.

HASAN BINS REPORT

In another development, Information Minister Hasan Mahmud said, "There is no difference between the TIB report and the speech of the Oikyafront. In fact, the TIB just published a report in favour of BNP and Jamaat-Shibir."

He was addressing a press conference in his Dewanji Pukur Par lane house in the port city yesterday, reports a staff correspondent in Chattogram.

The minister added that though the TIB usually claimed that its reports were based on research findings. But in fact, no proper research was actually done.