

France's Le Pen courts far right in Hungary, Poland

AFP, Brussels

France's far-right leader Marine Le Pen reached out to her counterparts in Hungary and Poland, both in government, during a European elections campaign meet in Brussels.

Hungarian PM Viktor Orban's Fidesz party would be welcome in the Europe of Nations and Freedom, a small right-wing European Parliament (EP) political grouping to which her National Rally belongs, she said.

Le Pen referred to the rift that has opened up between Orban and the conservative European People's Party (EPP) grouping in the EP.

"It's for Mr Orban to see if he finds more political coherence with the members of the EPP who have voted against him," she said.

In March, the EPP suspended Fidesz indefinitely from the bloc after a billboard campaign in Hungary that suggested European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker and US billionaire George Soros were plotting to flood Europe with migrants.

BNP's decision

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have any hesitation to say that our previous decision of not going to parliament was not right at that moment. We must carry on our fight on all fronts."

On April 29, four BNP MPs-elect took oath as members of the 11th Jatiya Sangsad at the directive of party acting chairman Tarique Rahman. Another BNP lawmaker-elect was sworn in on April 27.

However, Fakhrul did not take oath and his seat fell vacant later.

Yesterday, the BNP secretary general suggested that party leaders should not talk about its problems at any public meeting. "I urge you all to talk about party problems in party forums only."

Mentioning that the BNP was going through a tough time, Fakhrul called upon his party colleagues to make a strong commitment to overcome the situation.

He said the present political perspective is quite different from those of the '90s and 2001. "So, we have to assess the politics of 2019 and find out ways to become successful. We must use all the available opportunities to continue our struggle."

The BNP leader alleged that the government destroyed democracy and economy. "The country's economy is now in a very bad shape, no matter what they say about growth."

Referring to the statistics of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Fakhrul said 1,200 garment factories were shut and remittance inflows declined by 26 percent.

He said there is no security of the people, including women and children, due to lack of good governance and rule of law.

He alleged that the government was obstructing bail of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia in several cases as it was afraid of her popularity.

The BNP leader urged the government to immediately free Khaleda from jail as she was "seriously ill".

He also warned that the government would be held responsible if anything bad happened to her in jail.

Seven states

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President Rahul Gandhi, BJP leader Smriti Zubin Irani, Congress leader and UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi, Congress leader Jitin Prasad and SP's Poonam Sinha, wife of Shatrughan Sinha.

SP-BSP-RLD Alliance has not fielded its candidates in Amethi and Raebareli.

In Bihar, Indo-Nepal border has been sealed and strict vigil is being maintained to avert untoward incidents in the elections. Voting will be held in five Parliamentary constituencies including Sitamarhi, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Saran and Hajipur.

In Rajasthan, 12 parliamentary constituencies are going to polls in the fifth Phase to-day. Polling will begin at 7:00 am and continue till 6:00 pm. Political fate of 134 candidates will be decided in this state today.

In West Bengal, more than 13,000 polling stations have been set up. Major candidates in the fray include former railway minister and Trinamool Congress nominee Dinesh Trivedi, BJP's Arjun Singh, former Arjun awardees footballer, Prasan Banerjee and Ratna Dey Nag of Trinamool Congress.

In Madhya Pradesh, seven parliamentary constituencies will go to polls today.

In this phase, about one crore 20 lakh voters will decide the fate of 110 candidates, including nine women.

In Jammu and Kashmir's high altitude constituency of Ladakh, BJP is trying to retain the seat by fielding the Leh Hill Council Chief Executive Councillor Jamyang Tsering Namgyal. The Congress has given ticket to the council's former CEC Rigzin Spalbar.

Election to 542 Lok Sabha seats is being conducted in seven phases between April 11 and May 19. Results will be declared on May 23.



Industry experts participate in a consultation session on the findings of the study "The leather sector after the tanning industry relocation: issues and challenges" at The Daily Star Centre in Dhaka yesterday. The event was organised by The Asia Foundation and the Research and Policy Integration for Development, a non-profit organisation.

Make it compliant to boost export

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almost similar.

"We also need to set up a product development centre," he said, adding that India and Vietnam had made great strides, thanks to such centres.

The former caretaker government adviser also called for developing the skills of workers and mid-level managers.

The relocation of the leather tanning industry from the capital's Hazaribagh to Savar has faced several hurdles including the lack of a fully functional CETP and other supporting units, according to a paper circulated at the discussion.

"If the quality of the CETP and other supporting units is compromised, the whole purpose of the relocation will be lost."

RAPID Chairman Abdur

Razzaque and Prof M Abu Eusuf of the development studies at Dhaka University made a joint presentation.

"If there is no compliance, there will be no business for Bangladesh in the leather sector," Prof Eusuf said.

One can easily spot the deficiencies by simply looking at the tannery estate, he said, adding that some improvement had taken place.

Sehly Sadeque, assistant engineer at the BSCIC Tannery Industrial Estate, said discharge treatment was improving in Savar.

Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said tanners needed to improve their image.

Stern actions should be taken against non-compliant factories, he added.

It is very unfortunate that Bangladesh imports \$1 billion worth

of leather every year while the country has unused rawhide, he said.

Leather goods makers import the leather because many foreign buyers do not accept products made from Bangladeshi leather, he said.

Syeda Zakia Hossain, senior lecturer of the University of Sydney, said Bangladesh could observe the policies, processes and strategies of the countries that have fared well in the leather sector and learn from them.

Atiur Rahman, former governor of the central bank, said there were a fund of \$200 million as well as the export development fund at the central bank that the leather sector could utilise to make the factories compliant.

Saiful Islam, president of Leather goods and Footwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association of Bangladesh, also spoke at the event.

Golden fibre in troubled waters

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lakh tonnes to make yarn, sacks and other jute goods. The rest is used domestically or exported as raw jute.

Currently, some 200 private and 26 public jute mills are in operation.

SHRINKING GLOBAL MARKET

The country's jute industry relies heavily on export, which accounts for more than 80 percent, because of a lukewarm response from the domestic market.

But in recent years exports of jute and jute goods nosedived due to the falling demand in Turkey and India, two major markets.

Shipment of jute goods, including jute yarn, which is the main export earner in the sector, dipped 23 percent year-on-year to \$532 million until March of the current fiscal year, according to the Export Promotion Bureau.

"Jute yarn exports are going through an unprecedented crisis that we have never seen before. The slump in export earnings may continue," Md Shahjahan, chairman of Bangladesh Jute Spinners Association (BJS), said in a statement on March 28.

The BJS, which represents 82 private spinning mills, said that in the past the Turkish market accounted for 36 percent of Bangladesh's total jute yarn exports, followed by China and India.

But Turkey is facing a serious economic and political crisis. Its currency, Lira, depreciated 40 percent against the US dollar, affecting demand for imports from its carpet industry.

And the Indian market shrunk after New Delhi slapped anti-dumping duty on Bangladesh's jute goods, the BJS said.

Until 1980s, there had been a huge demand for CBC, especially in the US and European markets. But it almost died over the years, said Mushtaq Hussain, owner of The Golden Fibre Trade Centre Limited, a private jute mills.

The Middle East, particularly Iran, used to be a big market for hessian. But its low-cost substitute, plastic, has taken that market, he added.

For decades, jute yarn has accounted for two-thirds of the total annual export earnings from jute and jute goods.

Export earnings from other traditional jute products -- hessian, sacking and Carpet Backing Cloth

(CBC) -- have also been falling since its peak at \$237 million in 2012-13, according to state-run Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC).

In 2017-18, export earnings from these products stood at \$122 million, according to BJMC and privately-run Bangladesh Jute Mills Association (BJMA).

Currently, BJMC has unsold jute goods worth Tk 755 crore for a lack of buyers. In 2017-18, the state corporation incurred a loss of Tk 466 crore.

WHY THE FALL?

The trend of falling export began after 2010, and both external and internal factors are responsible for this, said Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

The external factors include falling global demand, poor competition against polypropylene products and slapping of anti-dumping duties on Bangladeshi jute goods.

On the other hand, poor performance by the BJMC, market-distorting activities and limited capacity of private millers as well as limited diversified products are among the internal factors, Moazzem said.

Industry people said exports to India, once a big market, dipped after the neighbouring country slapped anti-dumping duty on Bangladesh's jute goods on allegations of selling jute goods in Indian market at prices lower than in local market.

BJMC's export to India slumped to 8,987 tonnes in 2017-18 from 36,435 tonnes in 2015-16, the year before it imposed anti-dumping duty.

"The private sector could not perform well either in the global market," Moazzem said, adding that a lack of innovation in making diversified products was another reason why exports did not grow.

In the meantime, the market for polypropylene products has found a strong footing due to low petroleum prices, he added.

DIVERSIFICATION: INDIA DOING BETTER

India and China are two major players in making diversified jute goods, said M Sajjad Hussain Sohel, president of Bangladesh Jute Goods Exporters Association (BJGEA).

India in particular has made a lot of progress in this regard because of government support for the last two-three decades, he added.

It started implementing the

mandatory packaging law in the early 1990s. The government also provides Minimum Support Price (MSP) to ensure fair prices for growers, said Mushtaq, owner of Golden Fibre Trade Centre Limited.

The Indian government also supports the private sector to renovate mills by replacing old machinery with modern ones.

Because of this renovation, India's productivity has increased while its operation cost has come down.

In Bangladesh, however, most jute mills, especially those run by the government, still use decades-old machinery whose production capacity more than halved over the years.

And although the government provides a 20 percent cash incentive for making diversified jute products, the prices of raw materials are very high.

India has been giving such cash incentives for many years, which has made the industry stronger and encouraged businesses to invest in diversification, Mushtaq said.

In contrast, only a handful of private and public mills and small entrepreneurs are producing diversified jute goods.

Rina Parveen, executive director of Jute Diversification Promotion Centre, said a major problem here is the high prices of raw materials, which increases production cost.

DOMESTIC MARKET IS KEY

CPD's Moazzem said Bangladesh's jute sector needed a vibrant domestic market like that in India, where most jute goods are used domestically.

In 2017-18, for example, India produced 11,78,000 tonnes of jute products, of which 11,12,000 tonnes were used domestically, according to Indian government data.

"To promote jute products in domestic market, a full implementation of the mandatory packaging law is necessary," said Moazzem.

Under the Mandatory Jute Packaging Act 2010, 19 agricultural and industrial commodities, including food grains, sugar and fertiliser, must be packaged in jute bags, but that remains mainly on paper.

In a letter to the jute ministry in early April, the BJMA urged the government to enforce the law to save the industry.

On the other hand, the BJS demands more mobile court drives to ensure implementation of the law and help recover the sector.

Hard to start business here

Says Dutch ambassador, urges Brand Bangladesh to be rejuvenated

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Dutch envoy in Dhaka Harry Verweij has said foreign companies find it extremely challenging to set up firms in Bangladesh.

Efforts were being made to improve the situation, but a lot more needed to be done, the ambassador said at a press meet organised by the Diplomatic Correspondents Association of Bangladesh (DCAB) at the city's BISS auditorium yesterday.

He suggested improving the conditions of doing business in Bangladesh.

Verweij said there are a lot of positive and impressive things in Bangladesh and those need to be branded to improve the country's image.

"The brand Bangladesh must be rejuvenated and upgraded. There is so much positive to tell of this amazing country -- economic vibrancy, diversification, productivity, economic growth and warm and welcoming people."

The diplomat said Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) sector plays a pivotal role in enhancing the brand of Bangladesh. He called for making "Made in Bangladesh" a renowned global brand.

Mentioning that the Netherlands is a major destination for Bangladesh's exports, especially garments, he lauded Bangladeshi factories for making much progress after the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013.

However, he said more needed to be done. "Please keep the doors wide open for international relations and assistance. It is in all our interests."

Verweij said Bangladesh is one of the low-ranked countries in the World Bank's ease of doing business index, and foreign companies find it difficult to deal with fraudulence and corruption while setting up businesses here.

"As an embassy, we try to link up Bangladesh and Dutch businesses. We see many opportunities here, and hope that contextual aspects will be dealt with by the Bangladesh government," he added.

Verweij said the Netherlands, which has 46 years of bilateral relations with Bangladesh, saw the country as an equal partner, a shift from the donor-

recipient relationship or development cooperation, as Bangladesh would graduate from the category of Least Developed Countries.

"In that regard, our focus will be on aid to trade. Bangladesh's upward growth fits in with our role. The Netherlands will pay more attention in identifying and integrating alternative and innovative forms of funding.

"Our ambition is to be seen as a partner for finding multidisciplinary solutions that build a better future for all, thereby increasing trade and foreign investment," he said.

Lauding the Delta Plan 2100 adopted by Bangladesh, the ambassador said his country was ready to provide technical knowledge and expertise in implementing the plan.

However, the implementation needs huge investments from different sources, including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the private sector, as well as political support from the Bangladesh government and its people, he mentioned.

He said the Netherlands would support Bangladesh in addressing the Rohingya crisis and holding accountable the perpetrators of atrocities against Rohingyas.

The Hague-based International Criminal Court got a positive impression from Bangladesh that it would cooperate with the court after a delegation of the ICC prosecutor's office visited the country in March for preliminary examinations, the envoy said.

"The accountability is important for Bangladesh. It is important for the Netherlands. We will support the court in its efforts to ensure responsibility for the crimes [against Rohingya]," he told the programme.

Stressing the importance of freedom of expression in Bangladesh, he said it is interlinked with democracy.

"To improve, we must allow space for others to give their opinion and the right to disagree. None should get offended by the truth or at another's message and creative indulgence," the diplomat observed.

DCAB President Raheed Ejaz and General Secretary Nurul Islam Hasib also spoke at the programme.

Owners' greed key reason

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people in the society because they don't have appointment letters, identity cards, salary structure or pension benefits. They are also not entitled to fixed working hours or rest.

"It seems no section of Labour Law is applicable for transport workers," he said, adding they are not enjoying their rights, but they are held solely responsible for accidents.

Osman Ali said road transport is supposed to be a "service sector", but it has been made one of the main sectors of profit making.

"People are investing [here] to gain more profit resulting in an unhealthy competition," he said.

"Workers are forced to take part in the competition among owners for profit to save their jobs, which ultimately increases the risk of accidents."

The transport leader said family needs of a driver, lack of recognition and dignity and uncertainty over job make him reckless. In many cases, a driver fails to understand that his lack of alertness can cause a fatal accident.

The drivers remain always anxious because of trip-based operation of buses, deadline to reach destination, extortion on the road, harassment by police, excessive workload, rude behaviour of passengers and uncertainty over job.

"If one drives a bus or truck for 10 to 15 hours, how can he keep his concentration? Is it possible to ensure safe road without paying attention to the matter and solely blaming the drivers?"

Osman Ali said drivers, workers, owners and the administration are involved in the transport sector, and safe road is not possible only by punishing drivers.

"Road accident is an outcome of overall weakness [of the sector]; therefore, a combined effort is

needed to curb road accidents," he added.

Ruling party lawmaker Shajahan Khan, the executive president of the federation, said they have submitted 111-point recommendation to the prime minister to curb road accidents and bring discipline in the road transport sector.

However, those recommendations will not work if they are not implemented properly, said Shajahan, also a former shipping minister.

He mentioned that he had urged the prime minister to form an authority under her office to implement those.

Their other recommendations include arranging regular training for drivers and giving subsidy for this, checking documents of vehicles and drivers, examining mental condition of a driver before any journey, keeping reserved drivers for long-route vehicles and restricting them to a maximum of five-hour driving time at a stretch.

JSD lawmaker Shirin Akhter, Superintendent of Highway Police Saffur Rahman, labour leaders Rajekuzzaman Ratan and Chowdhury Ashiqul Alam and cultural personality Rokeya Prachi, also spoke at the programme, arranged to find ways to check road accidents.

Contacted, Mahbubur Rahman, vice president of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, claimed operations of only 20 percent buses in Dhaka city are "trip-based".

He said transport workers, not owners, work for profit and drive recklessly to make as many trips as possible a day.

In one sense, transport owners are held "hostage" by workers due to huge shortage of drivers. In many cases, drivers have to work more than eight hours a day as there are no reserved drivers, he added.

Campbell, Hope

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The partnership was eventually broken when Campbell was dismissed on a team high 137-ball 179 in the 48th over. He smashed 15 fours and six sixes while Hope departed in the

same over after scoring a 152-ball 170 laced with 22 fours and two sixes.

The third team involved in the series, Bangladesh, are set to take on the Caribbean team in their campaign opener on May 7.