

Dhaka, Dubai to ink three deals

PM flies for UAE tomorrow

BSS, Dhaka

Bangladesh and the United Arab Emirates are expected to sign three agreements during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Dubai visit from November 16 to November 19.

Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen made the remark at a press briefing in his ministry office yesterday.

"Two bilateral cooperation documents and a protocol will be signed during the visit," he said.

The prime minister would also inaugurate the NID registration programme for non-resident Bangladeshis during the visit, Momen said.

The tour to Dubai was made at the invitation of UAE's ruler Sheikh Mohammad Bin Rashed al Maktoum to join the Dubai Air Show-2019 and other programmes, he added.

Apart from the ruler of Dubai, Momen said Sheikh Hasina would also hold meetings with Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and UAE's Supreme Chairwoman of the Family Development Foundation Sheikh Fatima Bint Mubarak.

The three agreements, expected to be signed between the two countries, are bilateral cooperation between Bangladesh Investment Development

Authority and Emirates Development Authority, between Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority and Emirates Economic Zone Authority and protocol on Allotment of Land Plot for Bangladesh Embassy in Abu Dhabi.

"The Hon'ble Prime Minister will inaugurate NID registration programme of the nonresident Bangladeshi living in the UAE at the Embassy of Abu Dhabi," Momen said.

The registration facility is expected to benefit the Bangladesh expatriates living in the UAE for whom it is difficult to come to Bangladesh for registration purpose which involve expenditure and time.

During the visit, the prime minister is also expected to meet with big UAE investor groups and business people of the UAE, Momen said, adding that the UAE already showed interest to develop Sea port and related infrastructure in Bangladesh.

Besides, he said the Emirates Economic would like to invest in waste management sector and create a hub in Bangladesh Economic Zone for international exports of Halal products to the gulf countries.

"It is expected that the visit will have positive impact on UAE investment to Bangladesh in different sectors and will help in enhancing cooperation between the investment authorities," Momen said.

Onion heats up Sangsad

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traders get the opportunity [to hike the price even more]," he added.

Nasim urged the commerce and finance ministers to take effective steps and be more active to check the price spiral.

Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Commerce Tofail Ahmed said onion prices further increased due to cyclone Bulbul.

"I am really sad to say that price of a kg is now Tk 200. We have never thought that price of a kg of onions will reach Tk 200," said the former commerce minister.

Yesterday, onions were actually being sold for as high as Tk 220 a kg in retail markets.

Tofail urged the finance minister to withdraw all kinds of duties on onion imports to manage the crisis.

Jatiya Party MP Mujibul Haque suggested drives against unscrupulous traders to control the prices.

"We see that Phensidyl traders are getting killed in shootouts. It will be an example if onion traders responsible for the price hike die in shootouts."

He urged Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to "take personal initiative" to import onions from India.

BNP lawmaker Harunur Rashid said people were making fun of the skyrocketing onion prices on social media. "The government should be more active in controlling the prices."

Speaking about the soaring prices of onions, Hasina in her winding-up speech for the 5th session of the 11th parliament said the government would sell 50,000 tonnes of onions in the open markets in districts to curb rising prices.

She said the government has already taken steps to import onion from different countries, including Egypt and Turkey.

"LCs [letters of credit] have been opened for importing 50,000 tonnes of onions ... These onions will reach within a few days. We will give these onions to TCB [Trading Corporation of Bangladesh] to carry this to districts on trucks.

"We are aware about it and alert so that it [crisis] cannot deteriorate further."

The PM said the TCB was selling onions for Tk 45-50 per kg at different places.

Hasina said officials during drives

found onions going bad in storages but those were not being sold.

She said that usually farmers grow onion once a year. Researchers are working so that it could be grown round the year," she added.

Hasina said onions were Rs 100 a kg across India except one state.

PRICES SOARING

When lawmakers were vocal in parliament, the prices of the essential spice were making new records.

Within a day, the prices went up by Tk 30-40 per kg.

Yesterday afternoon, a kg of onions was being sold for Tk 220 in the capital.

The Burmese variety was selling for Tk 190-200 a kg and the Egyptian ones Tk 170-180.

The Daily Star found the prices at two kitchen markets and several retail stores in the city's Karwan Bazar, Moghbazar, and Farmgate areas.

During the visits, buyers were seen arguing with sellers, expressing frustration, and anger. Some were even mocking the "ridiculous" prices.

"It is simply fraud and anarchy. A section of traders is making extra profit, but the government is doing nothing," said Muhammad Mustafa in Karwan Bazar at one stage of his argument with a retailer.

He had gone to four-five shops but left the market without buying onions.

Shopper Saiful Islam said onions have no alternative and it was hard to stop using them.

"I think that the people of low-income group, like us, will have to stop onion consumption now."

Wholesalers and retailers were blaming "supply shortage" for the price hike.

"The way the shortage is, I think many traders will not be able to buy onions in the coming days," said Md Hridoy, a wholesaler in Karwan Bazar.

However, the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection, during a drive in the city's Shyambazar, found no supply shortage.

Shyambazar is one of the country's largest spice wholesale markets.

"We found sufficient quantity of onions in the market. We asked the traders why they were giving the excuse of supply shortfall, but none of them could give us a satisfactory answer," said Abdul Jabbar, an assistant director of the directorate.

Bangladesh has highest risk

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association.

In the report, each country is given a score from 1 to 100 for each domain and for the total bribery risk. A higher score indicates a higher risk of business bribery, Trace said.

In South Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan are the only countries where the bribery risk is "high". India and Pakistan are ranked 78th and 153rd.

Except for Bhutan, which has a "low" risk of bribery demands, the risk level of other countries in the region is "medium". Bhutan, which has the lowest risk score of 41, was placed ranked 52nd.

The five countries with the lowest bribery risk in the world are New Zealand, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland.

The countries with the highest risk are Venezuela, Yemen, North Korea, South Sudan and Somalia.

Bangladesh has consistently been named a "high-risk" country on the Trace bribery matrix since 2014, when the first matrix was released. But in 2016, Bangladesh was categorised as a country with a "very high" bribery risk.

The TRACE Matrix provides multidimensional, actionable insights about business bribery risk that can be used by companies to develop more targeted compliance procedures," TRACE President Alexandra Wrage said.

The matrix is based on four domains that measure potential business bribery risks in a country.

Business interactions with the government is the first domain where Bangladesh scored 86, which indicates that there is a high degree of government interaction in business, a high expectation of bribes and a high regulatory burden in the country.

Bangladesh scored 63 in the anti-bribery deterrence and enforcement. In other words, the quality of both anti-bribery dissuasion process and anti-bribery enforcement is low.

In the government and civil service transparency category, Bangladesh scored 60, which means there were medium levels of governmental transparency and poor transparency of financial interests.

Capacity for civil society oversight is the fourth domain, where Bangladesh's score, 64, is poor, meaning there was a low degree of media freedom and also a low degree of civil society engagement.

According to Transparency International's annual report -- Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2018 -- published in January, Bangladesh has scored 26 out of 100, two points lower than the 28 in 2017.

The slide is worse in terms of ranking. Bangladesh has been ranked in the 149th position from the top among 180 countries, which is six steps lower than the 143rd in 2017.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

From left, Md Kamrul Hassan, executive director for finance at Transcom Group, Matir Rahman, editor of Prothom Alo, Rokia Afzal Rahman, chairperson of Mediaworld Ltd, MA Malek, editor of the Dainik Azadi in Chattogram, and Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, editor-in-chief and CEO of Ekushey Television, pose for a photo with crests at a programme recognising the country's top taxpayers. Kamrul received the tax award on behalf of Transcraft and one of its directors Shahnaz Rahman, who paid the highest tax among women in Dhaka city. The programme was held at the Radisson Blu Dhaka Water Garden yesterday.

Mobile court not fully equipped

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Motor Vehicle Ordinance, 1983. Officials refute the allegations.

Amid widespread demonstrations for safer roads, parliament passed the act in September last year.

On October 22, the Road Transport and Highways Division issued a gazette stating that the law would come into effect on November 1.

In the first week of this month, the Road Transport and Highway Division sent the law to the home ministry to incorporate it into the schedule of the Mobile Court Act, 2009.

When the home ministry sent the act to the law ministry for vetting, the latter refused to incorporate the section-84 and -98 into the schedule of Mobile Court Act.

Nazrul Islam, secretary of the highway division, said the law ministry made the decision as the highest punishment under these two sections is three years in prison while the mobile court can give a maximum of two years sentence.

For unauthorised modification and overloading offences, police will have to file case and investigate and the court will hold trial.

"This is a time-consuming process," Nazrul told The Daily Star. "We sent a letter to the law ministry [via home ministry] seeking review of the decision but the law ministry was not persuaded."

He added that the offences are major concern for the authorities.

He hoped that the necessary gazette would be issued and the mobile court will be able to start working from Sunday. However, the gazette was not issued until yesterday evening, a ministry official said.

Under the section-84, an offender may face a maximum of three years or

a minimum of one year in prison or be fined Tk 3 lakh or both if they change the technical specification and structure of a vehicle without approval.

Section-98 says if anybody causes damage to life or property by reckless and risky overtaking, overloading, reckless driving, they would face a maximum of three years in jail or a fine of Tk 3 lakh or both.

Although the law ministry officials said that prison sentence of over two years was beyond the purview of a mobile court, there are many exceptions.

Two officials of the Road Transport and Bridges Ministry and BRTA said over 100 sections of different laws with more than two years' jail terms have been incorporated in the schedule of Mobile Court Act and mobile courts have been conducting drives to execute those sections for years.

"We have mentioned these issues, but the law ministry was not convinced," the ministry official said.

Some of the acts they mentioned are Protection and Conservation of Fish Act, Public Examinations Offences (amendment) Act, and Safe Food Act.

A BRTA executive magistrate said the mobile court will give a maximum of two years' sentence and when the court deems the punishment inadequate, the matter will be referred for filing a regular case.

Contacted, Naren Das, secretary of Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division, refused to comment on the issue.

The Daily Star could not reach Law Minister Anisul Huq over phone.

Supreme Court lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua, however, said the law ministry's decision to keep the sections out of the Mobile Court's purview was right.

"If any sections with more than two years' sentence have been incorporated

in the schedule of the Mobile Court Act, those were done illegally. One illegal decision can't justify another illegal action."

He said a case regarding the Mobile Court Act is still pending with the Appellate Division of the SC.

Jyotirmoy, also a vice-chairman of the Road Safety Foundation, said the authorities have kept many contradictory provisions in the Road Transport Act to provide the transport owners and workers with some undue advantage.

"These would ultimately jeopardise the purpose of the law."

PROBLEM WITH OVERLOADING AND MODIFICATION

Experts and Roads and Highways Department officials consider a major cause behind early damages to roads and bridges.

This increases maintenance cost of roads and bridges, they said.

Around 25 percent of the country's roads, constructed by the RHD, are in "poor, bad or very bad" shape, according to a survey on 17,452km of roads in March.

There are 21,576km of national and regional highways and district roads under the department.

There are only three weighbridges in two national highways and the government will build 21 axle load control centres for Tk 1,630.28 crore at the entrance points on the highways within June 2022.

But many owners modify the vehicles, especially trucks, to increase the load capacity. Owners of people carriers also modify their vehicles for similar reasons.

These modifications make the vehicles prone to crashes, said Kazi Shifun Newaz, associate professor of Buet.

GP agrees to deposit Tk 200cr with BTRC

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going to drag on.

It then set Monday for passing an order on a petition filed by the BTRC, seeking stay on a two-month High Court injunction on the regulator's move to realise the total dues from Grameenphone, which has the highest number of mobile phone subscribers in the country.

The October 17 HC order came as a blow to the telecom regulator which was all set to appoint administrators at Grameenphone and Robi to run them and realise Tk 13,447 crore it claimed the carriers owed the government in "taxes, revenue shares, and late fees."

Barrister Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, Advocate AM Aminuddin, and Barrister Mehedi Hasan Chowdhury argued for Grameenphone while Attorney General Mahbubey Alam and Barrister Khandaker Reza-E-Raquib appeared for the BTRC yesterday.

Grameenphone's lawyers told the SC that the carrier was ready to accept a decision reached at a ministerial meeting, attended by, among others, the telecom and the finance ministers on October 3. They also requested the court to take the meeting minutes into cognisance.

They said the meeting decided that GP would deposit Tk 200 crore with the BTRC.

In his reply, the attorney general talked of sufferings faced by mobile users, including frequent call drops. He also blamed GP for not clearing BTRC dues.

At this, the lawyers for the mobile carriers argued that GP and Robi were supposed to pay the dues following withdrawal of different BTRC "restrictions" on the carriers.

The telecom operator claims that the two top mobile carriers owe the state Tk 13,447 crore in revenue share, taxes,

and late fees until 2014, but the carriers said the amount was disputed.

Meanwhile, Grameenphone, in a statement yesterday, said, "We reaffirm our commitment that the way to resolve the audit issue is to continue with the jointly committed transparent process towards an amicable resolution with the prime minister's ICT advisor and relevant members of the government."

"Our position before the hon'ble court was that we have been and are still willing to make an adjustable deposit as part of the amicable resolution process in the light of the meeting held on October 3."

The statement also claimed that the BTRC audit report was incorrect and said any attempt to collect money on the basis of such an audit should stop.

Despite repeated attempts yesterday, The Daily Star could not contact any of the relevant BTRC officials for comments.

Suu Kyi named in Argentine lawsuit

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The lawsuit demands top military and political leaders -- including army chief Min Aung Hlaing and civilian leader Suu Kyi -- face justice over the "existential threat" faced by the Rohingya Muslim minority.

"For decades, the Myanmar authorities have tried to wipe us out by confining us to ghettos, forcing us to flee our home country and killing us," said Tun Khin, President of the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK).

Argentinean courts have taken up other universal jurisdiction cases, including in relation to ex-dictator Francisco Franco's rule in Spain and the Falun Gong movement in China.

Ojea said he hoped international arrest warrants would be issued as a result of the suit. However, the crime of genocide was not specifically included as it is in not in Argentina's penal code.

Myanmar faces mounting legal pressure in courts around the world for the 2017 expulsion of the Rohingya.

A separate case was filed Monday against Myanmar by The Gambia at the

UN's top court in The Hague.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) yesterday approved a long-awaited full investigation into Myanmar's alleged abuse of Rohingya Muslims, including crimes against humanity and persecution.

The Hague-based war crimes court said in a statement it "authorised the prosecutor to proceed with an investigation for the alleged crimes within the ICC's jurisdiction" relating to Myanmar.

The probe will look at allegations of "systematic acts of violence", deportation as a crime against humanity, and persecution on the grounds of ethnicity or religion against the Rohingyas, it said.

TIME FOR JUSTICE

UN investigators last year branded the 2017 military crackdown in Myanmar as "genocide" after some 740,000 from the Muslim minority were driven over the border into Bangladeshi refugee camps.

But rights groups pushing the case in Argentina demand the civilian

leadership must also be investigated for complicity alongside top generals.

They accuse the government of a failure to condemn operations, assistance in the cover-up and a role in confining Rohingya communities to ghettos.

Ojea, who is leading the case, acted as UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar between 2008 and 2014.

His collaboration is thought to be one reason why the case has been filed in Argentina.

"I have seen first-hand the suffering of Rohingya people," Ojea said. "It's time for justice to be done."

Two Argentine human rights groups -- Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo) and the Foundation for Peace and Justice (Fundacion Servicio Paz y Justicia) -- are supporting the lawsuit.

They have helped bring influential figures to justice over the tens of thousands of people who disappeared under the Latin American country's military rule.

UK tells EU will not name commissioner before election

AFP, Brussels

The UK government has written to EU chief Ursula von der Leyen to say it will not nominate a British member to her top team before its December 12 election.

"We have written to the EU to confirm that pre-election guidance states the UK should not normally make nominations for international appointments during this period," a UK official said yesterday.

A spokesman for von der Leyen's European Commission transition team told AFP she had received the letter from British authorities overnight.

Separately, EU sources told AFP von der Leyen has had legal advice that the lack of a British commissioner will not prevent her team from taking office.

President-elect von der Leyen's commission, made up of herself -- a German -- and senior officials from 26 other member states hopes to take office on December 1.

But the 28th EU member state, Britain, plans to leave the bloc on January 31 and Prime Minister Boris Johnson is fighting an election campaign on a pro-Brexit ticket.

There had been concern in Brussels that Britain's boycott would hold up the inauguration of the new European Union executive team.

Von der Leyen's target date for taking office, November 1, has already come and gone, after MEPs rejected her French, Hungarian and Romanian nominees.

But three more names have been put forward to replace them and the nominees are going through parliamentary confirmation hearings.

Von der Leyen now hopes to start on December 1.

US to keep around 600 troops in Syria

AFP, Seoul

The United States will maintain around 600 troops in Syria, Pentagon chief Mark Esper said Wednesday, despite Donald Trump's desire to end US involvement in what the president calls "endless wars".

"We're still moving troops out of northeastern Syria," the US defense secretary said onboard a plane as he travelled to Seoul, where he begins a tour of Asia on Thursday.

"We're going to have about 500 to 600-ish troops there, at the end of the day," he said. Asked if that figure included the approximately 200 troops deployed to the Al-Tanf base near the southeastern borders with Jordan and Iraq, Esper said that he was referring to northeastern Syria, where Trump has instructed the Pentagon to secure oil fields.

There would be "600-ish" troops across the country, he then reiterated.

Verify facts

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The government relies heavily on the mass media's positive role in preventing deterioration of public discipline and social unrest, it mentioned.

In view of this, the media is requested to publish objective and informative news after verifying facts accurately on such sensitive issues, it added.