

Modi to visit Dhaka on March 17

Foreign secretary says Delhi violence India's domestic issue; Indian foreign secretary due today

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka considers the recent violence in Delhi as India's domestic issue and expects the country's authorities to control it.

"As a domestic issue, we would want India to control it. It is our expectation," Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen told reporters after a seminar on Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) organised by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) at its auditorium in the capital yesterday.

The comment comes a day before Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla's two-day visit that begins today.

His visit comes following days of violence that erupted over the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) since February 23 in Delhi. The violence left 42 people dead and over 200 injured.

The enactment of the CAA by the Indian government late last year triggered widespread protests across India, but the latest one in Delhi turned most violent. The CAA created a pathway for Indian citizenship to the illegal migrants belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian communities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, but not for the Muslims.

Critics say the CAA violates India's secular constitution.

Asked about the government's response to some political parties demanding the cancellation of Modi's visit, the foreign secretary said Indian PM Modi will be coming to Bangladesh to attend Bangabandhu's birth centenary programme on March 17 at the invitation of the Bangladesh government.

"We are going to hold a mega programme. India played the biggest role during our Liberation War. So, we would expect the Indian Prime Minister to attend the event," he said.

Talking about Shringla's visit, he said the objective of the Indian Foreign Secretary's visit is mainly to do the groundwork for the visit of Indian's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 17.

This is Shringla's first visit to Bangladesh after taking charge as India's foreign secretary. He will meet Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen and Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen during his two-day visit. He will also attend a seminar on Indo-Bangla relations organised by the BISS today.

"As he was a high commissioner of India to Bangladesh earlier, his understanding on Bangladesh is good. During his time, the two countries consolidated the relations. So, he will take stock of the developments of the relationship and review the progress," Masud Bin Momen said.

Indian PM Modi will also hold a bilateral meeting with Hasina on March 17.

Asked what would be the issues that Bangladesh would raise during

the meeting, Momen said Dhaka will focus on the celebration of the birth centenary of Bangabandhu.

However, he said, there are already a number of projects underway that may be inaugurated during Modi's visit.

"We may also sign some MoUs that have been readied. These issues will be on the table, but our main focus would be the centenary celebration."

Our correspondent in Delhi reports that Modi may take his visit to Dhaka to discuss some deliverables or major markers in a forward movement in bilateral relations like a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), giving a push to defence cooperation for which India announced a 500-million dollar line of credit during Hasina's visit to India in April 2017, and connectivity.

The issues are also likely to be high on Shringla's agenda of talks in Dhaka ahead of Modi's visit.

The CEPA, which is a free trade deal in goods and services between two economically asymmetrical countries, was discussed at the meeting of Commerce Secretaries of the two countries in New Delhi in January.

India and Bangladesh signed a MoU of defence cooperation during Hasina's April 2017 visit for purchasing defence hardware from India. For the last two years, both the sides were in talks on modalities for using the soft loan.

Bangladesh has already agreed to put coastal radar system supplied by India along the Bay of Bengal shore to protect its own exclusive economic zone and marine resources.

On the connectivity front, the two countries are likely to finalise two more passenger train services besides the existing two between Dhaka and Kolkata (Maitri Express) and Khulna and Kolkata (Bandhan Express).

One passenger train route between Rajshahi-Kolkata via Rohonpur (Bangladesh) - Singabad (Malda in West Bengal) and another between Dhaka and Siliguri via Chilkabari and Haldibari of Coochbihar of West Bengal are under discussion between the two sides.

The two countries have already agreed to increase the frequency of Maitri Express and Bandhan Express from four to five days a week.

Shringla's visit will be the first high-level contact between the two countries since the controversy over CAA/NRC created rough edges on an otherwise burgeoning bilateral tie, reports our correspondent from New Delhi.

Bangladesh had cancelled visits by its Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen, his deputy Shahriar Alam and Home Minister Azaduzzaman Khan Kamal to India in the last few months in the wake of violence.

In an interview with Gulf News, Hasina had termed CAA "not necessary". On another occasion, Momen had said that CAA would "weaken" India's secular image.

Experts want

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yesterday. According to the government high-ups, their focus is on preventing the coronavirus from getting into the country. As part of this, the government has scaled up its screening process at all air, sea, and land ports.

The screening is only based on checking high body temperature, cough and respiratory illness using thermal scanners or infrared hand-held thermometers first. If anybody's body temperature is found high, health workers at ports check them further, they said.

Besides, any suspected patients are being admitted to the isolation unit of the government hospitals across the country.

But experts said this process would not work if any inbound passenger takes medicine like aspirin. They suggested that no suspected patients should be taken to hospital directly, as there is a chance of spreading the virus if they are infected.

"So, screening should be special for those coming from any affected country," Prof Md Nazrul Islam, former vice-chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, told this correspondent.

The virologist warned that the situation could be bad if the government was slow in responding.

On Friday, the joint commission of WHO and China issued a five-point advice for the uninfected countries in which it urged preparedness to immediately activate the highest level of emergency response mechanisms to trigger the all-of-government and all-of society approach that is essential for early containment of the coronavirus outbreak.

It has suggested testing national preparedness plans in light of the new knowledge on the effectiveness of non-pharmaceutical measures, largescale case isolation, respiratory support capacities and rigorous contact tracing and management.

The commission has also recommended testing all atypical

pneumonia patients for the coronavirus virus and adding testing for the virus to existing influenza surveillance systems.

In parallel with enforcing measures of infection prevention, it has asked to assess the general population's understanding of the virus and adjust national health promotion materials and activities accordingly. It urged engagement of clinical champions to communicate with the media.

Prof Muzaherul said, "Why experts from other government institutions like BSMMU are not involved in the national preparedness plan? Why test of any suspected coronavirus patient is done at one place?"

He proposed checklists for preparedness: preparing health workers, special isolation and quarantine arrangements for suspected or confirmed patients, arrangement for treating them at home, and awareness campaign.

"Screening is not enough for prevention. Educating the whole population is the key. Once it could be done, the country would not only be safe from this coronavirus, but also this generation would be safe from any such virus in future," said Prof Muzaherul, also a former adviser of WHO's South East Asia region.

He also recommended initiating a national campaign for educating people on three specific issues -- frequent handwashing, ideal sneezing manner, and staying three feet away from flu infected people.

Talking to this newspaper yesterday, Prof Sabrina Flora, director of Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said, "The preparedness plan would be finalised soon."

Currently, the IEDCR alone has the capacity to detect the new coronavirus.

Earlier, Prof Abul Kalam Azad, director general of the Directorate General of Health Services, said, "We will have everything in the national action plan -- what measures would be taken at different levels of emergencies."



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with a mug of Joy Bangla Concert 2020 to be held at the Army Stadium on March 7. She also unveiled a poster and T-shirt of the concert at the Gono Bhavan on Saturday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Exiled yaba lord reclaims throne

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arrested, according to law enforcement sources.

Finally, he returned to the country early last month on "green signal from his network", they said.

Now believed to be running the show from India, the 36-year-old has reorganised his gang with around 150 members including women and children who directly take part in retail sales of yaba.

The Daily Star got this picture after a three-week investigation. These correspondents talked to people who work for Ishtiaq, local sources and members of different law enforcement agencies.

THE RACKET

A raggicker 20 years back, Ishtiaq now controls the yaba supplies in Mohammadpur, Gabtoli, Aminbazar, Beribadh, Hemayetpur and Ashulia.

His gang has adopted a new model of yaba trade and only sells the pills to trusted buyers and prefers online order and payment.

A member of Ishtiaq's gang sells minimum 50 and maximum 500 pink pills a day at Tk 250 to Tk 300 each in Mohammadpur. He or she gets Tk 2,000 to Tk 5,000 as commission, depending on the sale.

According to law enforcement sources, Molla Arshad, Ishtiaq's second-in-command, mostly takes care of the narcotics network.

Born in Saidpur, Arshad is a childhood friend of Ishtiaq. Both grew up in the Geneva Camp, a densely-populated settlement of more than 25,000 Urdu-speaking Biharis.

Once the driver of a doctor in Mohammadpur, he teamed up with Ishtiaq in 2011. The gang reached its peak after 2015 when the Geneva Camp became a hotbed for the mad drug. Nadim aka Pachish was Ishtiaq's second-in-command back then.

Arshad took the charge after Nadim was killed in a "gunfight" with Rab in July 2018. He was arrested with 60,000 pieces of yaba tablets in March that year but came out on bail just in 21 days.

HIS PROPERTY

Ishtiaq has over 100 bighas of land in Savar and Ashulia, where most people know him as Kamrul Islam, according to an investigation report of a law enforcement agency. He buys land from the needy by paying them high prices, said locals.

Ishtiaq and his wife Pakhi own two buildings in Ashulia. Around Tk 3 lakh is collected as monthly rent from the two buildings.

Sahab Uddin, caretaker of one of the buildings, said Pakhi used to live here with three sons in this building two years back but none of his family members come anymore.

Asked about Ishtiaq's whereabouts, Sahab said they hand over the rent to their manager Ibrahim every month. "We have heard that Ibrahim sends the money to India, where he [Ishtiaq] is living now."

The Daily Star rang Ibrahim's mobile phone dozens of times but he did not answer.

A high official of the Department of Narcotics Control said on January 27 that they have submitted their report to the Anti-Corruption Commission regarding Ishtiaq's property and the ACC already registered a complaint.

The ACC on November 11 last year filed two cases against Ishtiaq and his wife Pakhi on charges of amassing illegal wealth and not submitting their wealth statement.

Regarding the latest updates, an ACC official told The Daily Star on January 28 that the cases are still under investigation. They have no updates to disclose yet, he added.

A high official of an intelligence agency, who is watching Ishtiaq's movement for the last two years, also confirmed to this newspaper that the drug lord is hiding in India now.

"We have got some clue about his activities and trying to pinpoint the precise location."

Khorshid Alam, assistant director of DNC, who is taking care of Ishtiaq's cases, told The Daily Star on January 27 that they are on alert and always checking updates on Ishtiaq and his gang members.

BACKING OF POLICE

According to sources, Ishtiaq's men give Tk 8-10 thousand to some officers at Mohammadpur Police Station

every night and Tk 75 thousand to detectives every week to run the business without hassle.

Tanvir Adnan, an advisor to Ishtiaq, acts as liaison with police.

Since the very beginning, some unscrupulous police officials are protecting the drug lord in exchange for hefty amount of money. He is also backed by a number of local ward councillors linked to some ruling party leaders.

Locals alleged that whenever they handed over Ishtiaq's accomplices to police, officers brought weak charges showing a small recovery of drugs, helping them get bail in a short time.

On September 23 last year, a section of camp dwellers wrote to the home ministry and Police Headquarters naming three officials of Mohammadpur Police Station -- sub-inspectors Sajib Koch, Apurba Barman and Md Hasan.

Sajib, who is still the beat-in-charge of Geneva Camp area, allegedly receives certain amount of money from narcotic dealers in the camp through his informants.

Talking to The Daily Star on January 25, he brushed off the allegation and said drug dealers are spreading propaganda to malign him. "We have arrested many drug dealers at the camp. They are doing this to keep pressure on us."

There are allegations against the police personnel that they run drug business at the camp using police informants.

In November last year, Sajib's informant Kalim Jambu was arrested by the Detective Branch with 50 grams of heroin.

Asked about it, the official said, "Most of the informants are bad people. What Kalim did was not my responsibility."

He admitted that the drug business in the camp is still going on but the peddlers are using new strategies. "Earlier, they used to keep drugs inside camps. Now they keep those at the flats adjacent to the camp area."

On an average, 150 cases are filed with Mohammadpur Police Station per month, he said, adding that half of those are narcotics cases related to Geneva Camp area.

Contacted, SI Apurba Barman and SI Hasan made similar comments over the allegations against them.

Regarding action, a high official at the Police Headquarters, told The Daily Star that they investigate every complaint they receive and take action only after getting valid evidence.

Locals also alleged that the drug business in the camp is run by the nexus of police and narco bosses including Ishtiaq, Arshad, Golam Zilani alias Kana Zilani and Shakil alias Ganja Shakil.

This newspaper could not contact any of them.

DNCC ward-32 councillor Habibur Rahman Mizan, widely known as Pagla Mizan, and ward-33 councillor Tarequzzaman Rajib backed these drug kingpins, according to the law enforcers.

Both the councillors have been arrested in recent anti-graft drives and they are still behind bars.

There is an allegation that Rajib used to "manage" some top ruling party leaders for smooth operation of the narcotics business. His aide Imran Hossain, one of the top yaba dealers in Mohammadpur, was arrested in November last year with 11,000 contraband pills.

Asked about Ishtiaq's gang, Abdul Latif, officer-in-charge of Mohammadpur Police Station, told this newspaper that he couldn't say much as he joined the station recently.

About the allegation against the police officials, he said, "Allegations were raised against the very officers who were the most active and arrested a big number of drug peddlers in the area. All the allegations are not true."

He said the duty areas of the officers have been changed.

However, one of them is still assigned to the Geneva Camp even after a complaint against him was filed with the Police Headquarters in September last year. The man who lodged the complaint, had to leave the camp fearing reprisal, according to local sources.

Masudur Rahman, deputy commissioner (media) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), told The

Daily Star that police are working against drug trade with zero-tolerance policy.

Asked about involvement of some police officials, Masudur said, "If anyone files any specific allegation, we will investigate and take action."

BUSINESS IS GOOD

Two years into the "War on Drugs", which claimed over 400 lives, there is no dearth in supply and availability of yaba. According to police intelligence, over 90,000 pills are sold daily in Mohammadpur area alone.

According to drug users, the business of Geneva Camp now has expanded to its nearby safer places. The dealers are more careful now, they don't sell it in their own area and verify the customers before meeting them.

The entrance road of Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College & Hospital, Town Hall Bazar, Banshabari slum and a few roads near the Geneva Camp are safe zones where dealers deliver yaba pills to the customers.

Generally, the drug dealers prefer crowded place like restaurant forefront, hospital area to avoid suspicion.

"Deals are all done over phone. Even you can pay it through mobile transaction. When you go to the place, s/he will hand over the pills to you and leave the place immediately without any talk," said a drug user, who now buys yaba pills from Town Hall bazar area.

The drug users also said there is a change in quality now. Quality varies from dealer to dealer, place to place.

"Earlier there were three to four types of pills. Now there are more variations but the quality is down. Earlier there were symbols like RX and WY written on the pills. Now there is no such symbol on a pill; it's all plain," said another user, who has been taking yaba for the last five years.

According to the Department of Narcotics Control, around 3.10 crore yaba tablets were seized in 2019 despite major crackdowns by the law enforcement agencies.

The Border Guard Bangladesh seized 13,13,218 pills across the country in last two months, and 2,84,610 pieces worth over Tk 8 crore in Teknaf early Saturday alone.

Intelligence sources said previously yaba tablets were smuggled into Bangladesh mostly through the Myanmar border in large quantities. Now they are opting for new routes and strategies, adding Indian border and bringing in smaller consignments.

[Our Savar correspondent Akhlakur Rahman Akash contributed to this report]

Coronavirus might be here to stay

Expert at Johns Hopkins say

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Experts think that the new coronavirus might end up being a seasonal flu and will probably continue to circulate indefinitely.

"This is going to be with us for some time -- it's endemic in human populations and is not going to go away without a vaccine," Amesh Adalja, an infectious-disease expert at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security was quoted as saying by the Business Insider.

"It may decrease in transmission frequency so that you'll be able to have time to get a vaccine scaled up by the next appearance of it," Adalja added.

Many, including US President Donald Trump and Chinese president Xi Jinping have expressed hope that the upcoming warm weather will hinder the spread of coronavirus.

Respiratory viruses such as the coronavirus are more active in cooler climates because lower temperatures help harden the protective gel-like coating around the virus, making it more resilient.

If the coronavirus winds up fluctuating with the seasons like the flu, it could retreat in summer and return in the fall and winter each year.

Speaker calls off India tour at eleventh hour

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jatiya Sangsad Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury yesterday postponed her four-day India visit that was scheduled to begin today.

The speaker postponed her visit citing important responsibilities connected to Mujib Borsho -- the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Rahman -- celebrations starting from March 17, said a press release issued by the parliament secretariat around 10:45pm last night.

Her visit, originally scheduled to take place from March 2 to 5, is in response to invitations from speakers of India's Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

As she is in charge of organising and coordinating several events, including special sessions of parliament to be held on March 22 and 23, Shirin is currently unavailable for visits abroad, the press release added.

It was therefore decided that she would make the visit after the end of the celebration programmes.

The speaker postponed her visit at a time when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government is facing widespread criticism amid recent eruption of violence in Delhi between supporters and opponents of the Citizenship Amendment Act, that left 43 people dead.

Two killed in 'gunfights'

STAR REPORT

Two suspected criminals were killed in two "gunfights" with law enforcers in the capital and Feni early yesterday.

The man, who was killed in a reported gunfight with Rab members in the capital's Shyamoli area, was identified as Shahin Bishwas, alias Hanif Mia, 48, from Narayanganj, said Mohammad Mohiuddin Faruqui, company commander of Rab-2.

The incident took place when a Rab team signalled a CNG-run autorickshaw to stop at a checkpoint in front of the National Institute of Kidney Diseases and Urology around 12:15am, he said.

As the Rab men asked the three passengers and the driver to get off the vehicle, all but Shahin followed the instruction, the Rab official said. When the Rab men were forcing Shahin to come out, the others suddenly fired blank shots and tried to escape by crossing the adjacent boundary walls of National Institute of Mental Health and Hospital.

Rab members were forced to fire back when Shahin also started firing on them from inside the autorickshaw, triggering a "gunfight", Faruqui said. Hanif caught a bullet injury during the incident and was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead.

Later, the Rab team seized the vehicle and recovered a firearm and six bullets from the spot. Meanwhile, a youth was killed in a "gunfight" between two gangs of robbers in Chhagalnaiya upazila of Feni early yesterday, police said.

Mahbubur Rahman, inspector (investigation) of Chhagalnaiya Police Station, could not confirm the identity of the deceased but claimed that he was an active member of an inter-district robbery gang.

Police recovered a firearm and two bullets from the spot, reports a correspondent quoting police. Receiving information of fire exchange between two gangs, a police team rushed to the spot around 2:00am, said Mahbubur.

They found the victim lying on the ground with a bullet injury and took him to Feni General Hospital where doctors pronounced him dead, the inspector said.

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Macron calls for 'lasting' Syria ceasefire

AFP, Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron has called for Turkey and Russia to implement a lasting ceasefire in Syria's Idlib province in conversations with the two countries' leaders, the Elysee said.

Moscow-backed Syrian forces have since December led a military offensive against the final major rebel stronghold, where Ankara supports some rebel groups.

Macron expressed his "very strong concern about the unfolding humanitarian crisis" to Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian leader Vladimir Putin, according to a statement released on Saturday.

He also warned of the risk terrorist groups would spread "because of the military offensive of the Syrian regime and its allies," adding it undermined the 2018 Idlib agreement between Russia and Turkey to create a demilitarised zone in the northwestern province.