Projects hit snags

appeal, reads a press release sent

through its PR agency. Construction Project and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Line-3 Construction Project, among other works, are facing the problems.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab) has suspended all international passenger flights to and from Bangladesh from April 14 to April 20 midnight.

Caab made the decision after the government imposed an eight-day strict restrictions on public movement from April 14 to contain the sharp rise in Covid-19 cases and deaths.

Two flights had been operating on the Bangladesh-China route every week since July last year, sources said.

Although the government enforced the eight-day lockdown, it kept the eight fast-track projects out of its purview. Recently, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan has said they will not bar contractors from working if they can follow the health safety guidelines.

The CREC said the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project is an important cooperation project between Bangladesh and China. At present, the project is running at a full swing and the project personnel require to travel between China and Bangladesh frequently.

Around 30 people, including the project managers, safety and quality personnel, and technical construction personnel in key positions involved in the projects, need to travel between the two countries every week, reads the press release.

Due to the outbreak, the project management personnel and the onsite labour arrangements have been continuously affected.

And now, the flight suspension policy has even worsened the progress of the project. If these personnel cannot return to the construction site from China on time, some working procedures are going to be difficult to implement, and some work will even be forced to be suspended, it said.

"This will directly affect the

progress of the construction work," it

At present, the pandemic situation Chattogram-Cox's Bazar Rail Line in China has been effectively construction Project and Bus Rapid controlled. The Chinese personnel who came to Bangladesh were all vaccinated with two shots, and therefore they will not pose any risk of infection to Bangladesh, added the

Contacted, Project Director (PD) of the Padma Bridge Rail Line Project Golam Fakhruddin Ahmed Chowdhury also admitted

He said a group of experts for starting the installation of rail track under the project is supposed to be in Bangladesh, but their arrival is getting delayed due to the flight suspension.

Some 700 Chinese nationals are now working under the project, he

The government is implementing the Tk 39,246 crore project to connect the capital with Jashore by 2022 with a 169km rail line over the underconstruction Padma bridge.

Another fast track project is the construction of the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar rail line and the CREC is its contractor of the CTG-Cox's Bazar rail project.

"The manpower of CREC is not that big in our project. Yes, we are facing a little problem over the issue [suspension of flights], but it is not that big," an official of the project told The Daily Star yesterday.

"However, we are facing problems in bringing construction materials from abroad. We are continuing our work, but it can't be said that we are working in full swing," he said, wishing not to be named.

Some experts required for the Bus Rapid Transit Line-3 were supposed to reach Bangladesh this week, but their arrival got delayed due to suspension of flights, Shafiqul Islam, managing director of Dhaka Bus Rapid Transit Company Limited (DBRTCL), said yesterday.

The government is building a dedicated bus line from Dhaka Airport to Gazipur under the project.

Mirza 'behind Friday attack additional law enforcers have been

FROM PAGE 12

However, ruling party men had to conclude the press conference half way through due to police intervention amid the ongoing lockdown.

Earlier on Friday around 10:15pm, a gang of miscreants hurled five bombs at the village home of Obaidul Quader in Campaniganj. Of these, two exploded.

Police arrested a man for interrogation in this connection.

Mirza and his rival Mizanur Rahman Badal, the organising secretary of upazila AL, blamed each other for the bomb attack.

Hours before the attack, Mirza people of Campaniganj would not let establishing supremacy in the area. any development work in his own electoral constituency despite being a Chowdhury and Nizam Uddin Hazari.

A day before, at least 20 people were injured in clash between the supporters of Mirza and Badal on Thursday.

Zahidul Mir Haque Rony, officer-in-charge of Campaniganj Police Station, said

deployed to avert any untoward

Mirza came to limelight after making comments against corruption and misdeeds committed by AL men in Noakhali and Feni for the last few

On multiple occasions, he even came down heavily on government officials for their alleged involvement with corrupt politicians. He also repeatedly criticised his brother Obaidul Quader and his wife for patronising corrupt politicians.

This made the political situation in Companiganj upazila volatile. Two on Friday afternoon on a Facebook deadly clashes had even occurred live post announced that he and the there between two AL groups over

Obaidul Quader come to the upazila One group was led by Mirz because the latter did not initiate and the other by Badal, a follower of lawmakers Ekramul Karim

The first clash took place on February 19 that killed a local journalist Borhan Uddin Muzakkir, 30, and injured many others.

The two groups again clashed on March 9, leaving CNG-run autorickshaw driver Alauddin, 22, dead and 30 others injured.

Bangalees claim Calcutta

new Bangalee nation.

He issued a 1,600-word statement, recounting how the Pakistani government had flouted the clear verdict of a democratic election in Bangladesh and engaged itself in "a planned attempt to subdue and crush

the entire Bangalee nation". Hossain Ali further said that more than 50 of the approximately 80 members of the mission were Bangalees. He said the 30 West Pakistanis would not be kept in the mission and that any of them "who wish to return to West Pakistan will be allowed to do so without hindrance and at the earliest opportunity."

It is also reported that the entire money in the credit of the Pakistan Deputy High Commission in a Calcutta bank was withdrawn on April 17. The measure had the approval of all senior members of the mission. **MUJIB MOVED**

Associated Press reported today that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the imprisoned leader of Bangladesh Liberation Movement, had been taken to another jail after treatment in the Combined Military Hospital in Rawalpindi. Bangabandhu was now at a prison at Mianwali,

informed the news agency. But officially declared the creation of the according to Government informants, Sheikh Mujib was on a hunger strike. PURGE OF BANGALEES FROM PAKISTAN CIVIL SERVICE

A purge of Bangalees from the Pakistan armed forces and key Civil Service posts was reported under way. It is reported that the aim was to remove "unreliable elements" from every aspect of the government's drive against the independence seeking Bangalees. Hundreds of Bangalee servicemen in West Pakistan had been sent on leave but had been forbidden to return to their homes in the eastern province. It is further reported that the 20 Bangalee civil servants had either lost their jobs or been given lesser

INDONESIA WILL NOT RECOGNISE BANGLADESH

Indonesia would not recognize Bangladesh because it didn't want to see other people's country split, told Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik today. He reaffirmed that Indonesia regarded the Pakistani crisis as the internal affair of the country, and no outsiders had the right to

Shamsuddoza Sajen is a journalist and researcher. He can be contacted at sajen1986@gmail.com

Israel strikes Gaza after

The Israeli military yesterday said it had conducted airstrikes against targets in the Gaza Strip following a rocket attack from the Palestinian enclave, in the second such exchange in as many days.

The strikes hit what the military described as "terror targets" operated by Gaza's Islamist ruling party

They included a "training facility, an anti-aircraft missile launcher post, a concrete production plant & terror tunnel infrastructure".



Asylum-seeking migrants' families go under a barbed wire fence while being escorted by a local church group to the location where they turn themselves in to the US Border Patrol, after crossing the Rio Grande river into the United States from Mexico, in Roma, Texas. Photo was taken on Friday.

ACC opens probe into BTCL graft

A committee formed on June 10 set the estimated cost at Tk 34.13 crore and an international tender was called on December 12, 2019. Five companies

took part in the bidding.

Tech Valley offered Tk 27.10 crore, Huawei Technologies Tk 20.73 crore, Uhan Fiberhome Tk 26.26 crore, X-Fer Tk 31.33 crore, and ZTE Corporation Tk 37.40 crore.

BTCL's seven-member evaluation committee unanimously found four companies disqualified and X-Fer's offer the only responsive bid with an evaluated price that is 8.716 percent lower than the officially estimated cost, according to meeting

The committee included three of BTCL's deputy managing directors, one of them being the chairman; the project director as the member secretary, and an official from the telecom ministry.

Prof Dr Kauser Alam and Lt Colonel Rashedul Islam joined as external members, representing Buet and Bangladesh Army respectively.

The tender evaluation report recommended X-Fer and it got signatures by the member secretary and both external members. But BTCL Deputy Managing

Directors Md Rafiqul Islam, AKM Habibur Rahman, Khandaker Jubayer Hasan and Deputy Secretary of the Telecom Ministry ABM Badiuzzaman refrained from signing the report.

They rather disagreed with the recommendation and opined for a re-Their reasoning was that the

qualified bidder's price is higher than that of the disqualified ones, despite admitting that there is no scope for comparing the price of the disqualified bidders with that of the winner as per

They made handwritten changes to several page numbers of the printed report and inserted additional two pages containing their dissenting opinion beyond the knowledge of the members who signed it.

The Daily Star learnt all this from ACC documents, tender-related papers of BTCL and a complaint filed by a government agency with the anti-graft

Concealing the doctored evaluation report, a separate working paper was presented to the BTCL board.

The 11-member board includes five ministry officials besides the posts and telecommunication secretary and the BTCL MD. The remaining four are external members.

In the 176th board meeting, the ministry officials and the BTCL boss supported re-tender, while the external members were against it as it was

beyond the ambit of the law.

The external members raised their eyebrows as the tender evaluation report was not made available at the meeting. The board decided to discuss

the matter at the next meeting. Still, without the evaluation report, the 177th board meeting, held virtually, decided to call for a retender. Two external members vetoed

Of the other two external members, the FBCCI representative who participated in the previous meeting was denied access to the Zoom videoconferencing system on the pretext that he was abroad.

The Buet representative was shown, in the meeting minutes, in favour of the re-tender as he did not disagree in

Fazlul Karim, founding director general and now adviser of the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) of the government, told the Daily Star, "There is no provision in the Public Procurement Act [PPA] or the Public Procurement Rules [PPR] that allows consideration of the nonresponsive bid that failed to meet the qualification criterion or technical specification."

The rules have made it mandatory to evaluate and compare only the responsive bids, he said.

The evaluation committee has no choice other than to compare the lowest evaluated price with the official estimate. Comparing non-responsive bids with the lowest one is not permitted.

"Opining for re-tender based on disqualified bidder's price means that they deliberately defied the law despite being aware of it.'

Replying to queries of this correspondent, he further said there telecommunication division, did allows arbitrary cancellation of tender. The authorities may cancel a tender under certain circumstances specified

The STNP tender was cancelled on July 23 last year, and X-Fer was notified 24 days later instead of seven days as specified in the law.

The qualified bidder went to the review panel of the CPTU, an agency responsible for managing procurement by government bodies.

BTCL admitted to the review panel that the procurement rules were not taken into consideration while cancelling the tender.

Interestingly, the review panel recommended action against the project director along with officials who prepared the cost estimate citing the petitioner's complaint, but at the same time rejected the complaint.

According to documents,

committee formed following approval by the MD of BTCL prepared the official cost estimate on November 27, and the MD approved it on December 11 and kept it sealed.

The project director neither prepared nor approved any estimate. The petitioner had also no complaint about the estimate.

Recommending punishment to anyone who has no role in estimate preparation or approval is never expected, Fazlul Karim said.

Still BTCL went for re-tender on September 13, 2020, even before the review panel made its decision on

X-Fer Ltd went then to the Supreme Court in November, challenging the decision of the review panel of the CPTU and seeking cancellation of the re-tender and direction to accept the tender of X-Fer.

The SC is scheduled to hold a hearing on the matter today.

CHANGE IN THE COMMITTEE, RE-TENDER

For the re-tender, a new evaluation committee was formed excluding the external members of Buet and the Army without informing them. New members were chosen from the Bangladesh Tariff Commission and the Power Grid Corporation of Bangladesh.

Under the re-tender, the new committee recommended awarding the work to ZTE Corporation although its price was found to be inconsistent.

The evaluation committee was headed by the project director of BTCL's MÓTN project, which is being implemented by a Chinese firm which participated in the bidding, creating a conflict of interest.

The BTCL board, chaired by the new secretary of the post and is no provision in PPA and PPR that not accept the recommendation and ordered the cancellation of the re-

Again a second re-tender was floated on February 22 this year and it closed on April 7.

Contacted, BTCL Managing Director Rafiqul Matin said, "The tender has been renewed. There were no irregularities in the tender process of the project.'

When asked about the inquiry of the ACC, Posts and Telecommunication Minister Mustafa Jabbar said nobody would be spared if any corruption allegation is proven.

Afzal Hossain, the new secretary of the posts and telecom division, refrained from making any comment. Of the four officials being

investigated by the ACC, Nur-ur-Rahman, Mohsinul Alam and Md Moslehuddin could not be reached for comments.

Axed flights leave migrants in the lurch

countrywide "strict lockdown".

They also said Biman should have informed them well in advance about

the cancellation of its flights. Migrant workers blamed lack of coordination and sincerity of the national flag carrier and the other

authorities concerned for their sufferings. Biman MD Mostafa Kamal and Civil Aviation Secretary Mokammel Hossain, however, denied the

Speaking to reporters after an inter-

ministerial meeting at the Dhaka airport, they said the Saudi authorities did not grant Biman flights landing permission at the last moment.

"We tried to contact our valued passengers by calling them to inform them about cancellation of flights. But we couldn't inform those passengers who bought tickets through travel agents as many didn't respond to our calls," said the Biman MD.

Describing his sufferings, Sohrab Hossain, a migrant worker from Dinajpur, said he had to spend Tk 26,000 to rent a microbus for a trip

to Dhaka to catch the Saudi-bound Biman flight which was scheduled to depart HSIA at 6:15am yesterday.

Monsur Ahmed, another Saudibound expatriate worker from Chandpur, said: "After enduring sufferings, all I have come to know that my flight has been cancelled and I am not sure when I will be able to return to Saudi Arabia."

Md Akhtar told this correspondent that his Saudi visa will expire on April. Like Akhtar, several other migrant workers also said their visas will expire next week.

Nasa's InSight

Unfortunately, not all has gone to plan. Despite InSight landing in Elysium Planitia, a windswept area of Mars that gets lots of sunlight, none of the passing dust devils (funnel-like chimneys of hot air) have been close

enough to clean the panels. This means that InSight is only getting 27 per cent of the power that it otherwise would - shared between its scientific instruments, robotic arm, radio, and heaters.

To make matters worse, the windiest Martian season has just ended and it could be months before another cleaning event naturally occurs, and Mars is moving away from the Sun. Its already weak energy is getting weaker, and when InSight needs it most, and

science operations have had to be put on hold until July 2021 when Mars is closer to the star.

"The amount of power available over the next few months will really be driven by the weather," said InSight's project manager, Chuck Scott of Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Southern California.

"As part of our extended-mission planning, we developed an operations strategy to keep InSight safe through the winter so that we can resume science operations as solar intensity increases.

Nasa scientists now find themselves in the unenviable position of having to choose which instruments need to be switched off each day to conserve necessary power for the heaters and

radio communication.

The craft's weather monitoring will be off most days, meaning that Nasa will get less frequent updates about its environment, but Nasa hopes that even if the craft did go offline due to a lack of power that it would be able to reboot when the sunlight returns.

Before that, there is some recourse the agency can take to try and spark the lander into life. InSight will move its robotic arm, equipped with a camera, closer to the panels to better image the dust coating later this week.

The team will then pulse the motors which unfurl each panel, in an attempt to disturb the dust. Nasa is not hopeful this will work, however, but feels it is worth the attempt to keep the craft

Signs of progress

is not present as Iran has declined face-to-face negotiation.

However, European Union officials chairing the talks are carrying out shuttle diplomacy with a U.S. delegation based at another hotel across the road.

Negotiators are working on steps that both sides must take, on sanctions and nuclear activities, to return to full compliance, but the talks have been further complicated by an explosion at Iran's main uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz.

Iran has responded by saying it is enriching uranium to 60% fissile purity, a big step towards weaponsgrade from the 20% it had previously

China's envoy to the talks earlier said all participants - China, Russia, France, Britain, Germany and Iran had agreed to accelerate work on issues including which sanctions the United States would lift. "All parties have agreed to further

pick up their pace in subsequent days by engaging (in) more extensive, substantive work on sanctions-lifting as well as other relevant issues," Wang Qun told reporters. Tehran says the Natanz blast was an

act of sabotage by Israel and yesterday named a suspect. Israel has not formally commented on the incident.

Wang, the only envoy who regularly speaks to reporters outside the talks, said remaining parties to the deal had resumed "productive and constructive work" over the past two days.

"In the next few days we hope the Joint Commission will immediately start negotiating the specific formula of sanction-lifting," he added, using the term for formal meetings of those

Covid death toll

slump, the Indian government is desperate to avoid a second stoppage. But Delhi joined Mumbai in ordering all but essential services to close.

The city of more than 20 million people now has the most daily cases in India and restaurants, malls and gyms were all closed. Weddings can go ahead with guests limited to 50 people, while only 20 can attend funerals. Maharashtra, which

Mumbai, Gujarat and Bangalore's home state Karnataka have also imposed restrictions on movement.

Uttar Pradesh state, home to some 240 million people, has ordered a one-day lockdown today.

Similarly, the northern state of Uttarakhand has restricted gatherings to 200 people -- but exempted the huge Hindu Kumbh Mela festival. The gathering in Haridwar has attracted up to 25 million people since January, including some 4.6 million this week alone, with most people ignoring

Covid-19 guidelines. More than 1,600 people tested positive for coronavirus in Haridwar in barely three days this week and experts fear that many devotees will take the virus back to their home

towns and villages. The latest round of voting also went ahead in the West Bengal state election with long queues forming outside polling stations. Rival parties have been holding huge rallies in recent weeks again fuelling superspreader fears.

Hopes that South Asian countries might have seen the worst of the pandemic have been dashed, with India recording over two million new cases this month alone and Bangladesh and Pakistan imposing new shutdowns.

Udaya Regmi of the international Red Cross said the "truly frightening" South Asian surge was a "wake-up call to the world". "Vaccines must be available to

everyone, everywhere, rich and poor

to overcome this terrible pandemic,' Regmi added. Richer countries that have waged mass inoculation efforts have seen their virus numbers plummet. Britain, which has given 60 percent of the population at least one vaccination

dose, now records around 30 deaths a

day -- down from 1,200 in late January. Thailand recorded its fourth consecutive day of more than 1,000 new cases yesterday, with spiralling infections linked to a nightlife district of the capital Bangkok earlier this month. Alcohol sales will be banned in Bangkok restaurants from today, while entertainment venues will be shuttered across the country for two weeks.

In Brazil, the country with the third-highest death toll in the world, night shifts have been added to several cemeteries as diggers work around the clock to bury the dead. More than 365,000 people have died from Covid-19 in the country.

But there was better news in Europe, where some countries are easing their lockdowns in response to not only fatigue, but falling infection numbers and progress with vaccinations.

Italy announced Friday it will ease coronavirus restrictions for schools and restaurants from April 26. Expressing "cautious optimism"

Prime Minister Mario Draghi said his government was taking a "calculated Italy will also allow up to a

thousand spectators at outdoor events from May 1, when it eases its stadium fan ban in regions less affected by the

rocket attack AFP, Jerusalem