

Pak PM eager to work with Hasina

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Pakistan's newly-elected Prime Minister Mian Mohammad Shehbaz Sharif said he looks forward to working with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for a better future of the two countries and for achieving the common vision of peace and lasting prosperity in the region.

In reply to the letter of felicitation by Hasina, he said: "I wish to thank you most sincerely for your message of felicitations."

Shehbaz Sharif said the strong bonds of fraternity linking the two peoples have deep roots in shared history, common faith and convergent interests, according to a statement of Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka yesterday.

He conveyed his best wishes for good health and happiness and for ever increasing progress and prosperity of the people of Bangladesh.

HRIDAY MONDAL

Run judicial enquiry into the incident

Demands Nirmul Committee

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Munshiganj

Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee has demanded formation of a judicial probe committee to investigate the filing of a case against teacher Hriday Chandra Mondal over hurting religious sentiment, his subsequent arrest and denial of bail on two occasions.

The committee also demanded the government ensure the teacher's safety and take initiatives to enact "Minority Protection Act" and immediately constitute a National Minorities Commission with judicial powers.

The demands were raised at a views-exchange meeting at the Munshiganj Circuit House auditorium yesterday morning.

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Holding food boxes and glasses of flavoured drink in their hands, people from low-income families wait for Iftar in the capital's Kamalapur on Thursday evening. A group of youths distributed the food among about 400 people for free. The group, which gives a free meal to about 500 people each day, has been running the initiative titled "Bhalo Kajer Hotel" for about a couple of years to inspire people to do a good deed every day. Each member of the 1,350-strong group contributes Tk 300 a month to support the initiative, also backed by some donors.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

RENEWABLE ENERGY, COASTAL DYKE

US pledges to help Bangladesh

Momen, Kerry hold talks in Palau

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The US has assured Bangladesh of providing assistance in the areas of renewable energy, afforestation and improving coastal embankment.

The pledge came when Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen held a meeting with US President Joe Biden's Special Envoy for Climate Change John Kerry in Palau, a Western Pacific Island country, on the sideline of 7th "Our Ocean conference" on April 13-14.

Momen attended the conference, co-hosted by the US and Palau, at the invitation of John Kerry.

Kerry said the US would support Bangladesh in improving and widening embankment at the coastal banks of Bangladesh as part of a climate change adaptation endeavour, according to a foreign ministry statement.

He lauded Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's global leadership on climate change issues and urged Bangladesh to join Global Methane Pledge to get assistance in reducing emissions from solid waste.

Momen described the potential of Bangladesh in harnessing the blue economy and urged the US support for creating employment in this sector.



Countries joining the Global Methane Pledge commit to a collective goal of reducing global methane emissions by at least 30 percent from 2020 levels by 2030.

Addressing the conference, Momen called for taking decisive and collective actions to ensure the planet's longevity. "We must protect, preserve and promote our oceans and ecosystems to save the planet," he said.

Bangladesh's foreign minister said the ocean's ability to provide crucial ecosystem services is being reduced due to climate change, marine pollution, unsustainable extraction of marine resources and physical alterations and destruction of aquatic and coastal habitats and landscapes.

Momen said to achieve SDG 14, Bangladesh announced five new

commitments, including a National Plan of Action to eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and demark a new Marine Protected Area on Saint Martin's Island.

The other three commitments are to take actions aimed at ensuring safe ship recycling by 2023, formulating Solid Waste Management Rules 2021 and harnessing marine resources sustainably under Blue Economy for inclusive development.

"We must not be afraid of setting a new trajectory for the development of our oceans and seas for a better life," Momen said.

On the sideline of Bangladesh and Palau, Momen also paid a courtesy call on Palau president Surangel S Whipps Junior. Whipps said Palau is keen to strengthen its bilateral ties with cooperation in the blue economy as well as increasing trade and commerce.

Momen urged Palau to import pharmaceuticals and ready-made garments from Bangladesh, increase cooperation in the blue economy and tourism development between the two countries.

Palau's president showed keen interest to import pharmaceuticals and recruiting physicians from Bangladesh.

Magic of phantom exports

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Shipping papers show Mamun Enterprise is located at Shatabdi Centre in the Inner Circular Road in the capital's Fakirapur. On March 20, The Daily Star found another business establishment named Janani Enterprise there. A guard working for four years there said there was never a business named Mamun Enterprise at the centre.

Miazi Food Products Ltd, the other venture owned by Mamun Miazi, was found in its official address, but on a different floor.

Asked about the ghostly exports, Mamun said he had no clue how some of their consignments were shown 'shipped' on the NBR server. "We received only Tk 7 to 8 crore in incentive and some of them were against legal invoices," he said, and declined to comment on the fake address of Mamun Enterprise.

Two other companies - Doe Empex Ltd and MB Agro Food Product - showed similar non-existent exports, claiming Tk 4.22 crore and Tk 15 lakh in incentives, respectively.

Contacted, Doe Empex Ltd Chairman Zia Hayder Mithu first asked this correspondent to call him later, but he did not pick up the phone afterwards.

MB Agro Food Product owner Mushtaq Khan sounded unperturbed about his company's involvement in the fraud.

"Even though the goods were not exported, several crores of taka have entered the country, which is playing a big role in increasing the foreign reserves," he said. **UNEARTHING THE SCAM** The Chattogram Customs

formed two probe committees in November last year, after The Daily Star published a report titled "Chattoogram Port: Phantom export raises alarm". That report was just a tip of the iceberg.

Five months later in February this year, Chattogram Customs House Commissioner Mohammad Fakhru Alam sent a letter to the NBR chairman detailing the massive scam.

"Some exporters are taking incentives from the government by falsely showing exports, with the help of some customs officials and C&F [clearing and forwarding] agents. Investigations show these products did not even enter the private ICD [inland container depots] yards or the port," the letter reads.

The letter also requested the central bank and the commerce ministry to file criminal and money laundering cases against the scammers.

The customs had attached a detailed list of 872 fake consignments of 18 exporters with the letter.

At least 93 ghostly consignments of three other exporters have since been identified, and officials anticipate the number to go up as a separate investigation is underway.

Customs documents show at least 20 C&F agents helped the exporters obtain customs officials' IDs and passwords to create fake export entries on the NBR server.

Such forgery through false declaration happens mostly in the case of products whose export fetches 20 percent incentives, Fakhru Alam said.

Imports and exports by these identified companies as well as the licences of the C&F agents have since been suspended, he added.

NBR authorities have also suspended payments of incentives to any of the identified fraudsters, and are considering legal actions against them, said Hossain Ahmed, an NBR member who looks after export, bond and IT sections.

"We will sue them over money laundering for bringing dollars into the country illegally," he said.

BREACHING THE NBR SERVER

These non-existent exports were possible just by changing the status of the shipments on the NBR server. It was done by using the IDs and passwords of customs officials, investigators found.

As per the rules, exporters through their nominated C&F agent first create a Bill of Export on the NBR server. The exporters then carry the consignment to ICDs at the port for customs inspection, before they are sent to the port.

The port authorities then clear the consignments for shipment on the designated ship. The exporters then submit the "shipment on board" certificate and other documents to the ICD official for upgrading the consignment status from "yellow" to "green" on the server, meaning the goods have left for the destination.

For the fake exports, however, the gangs have simply created an export file on the server by using authorised IDs and passwords. In some cases, they prepared fake documents, and in other

cases no documents at all, investigators said.

Customs authorities are yet to identify the IDs used.

The Daily Star randomly reviewed 84 documents and found eight IDs were used to upgrade the consignment status from "yellow" to "green".

Changing the status of export goods is easier as they go through a single-step customs inspection as opposed to the four-step inspection for imported goods, officials said.

Abul Kashem, deputy commissioner of the Customs House, said the export process should be made more rigorous, having three to four phases of inspections.

"Currently, the Bill of Export is submitted on the server by the exporter's C&F agent. The export process is deemed complete upon receiving copies of the depot and port officials, without requiring any confirmation on the server," he added.

To prevent similar breaches, customs authorities have recently introduced one-time passwords (OTPs), sent to the authorised personnel's mobile phones.

HOW DID THE EXPORT PROCEED?

To claim incentives from Bangladesh Bank, exporters are required to submit export information on the NBR server along with an acknowledgment letter, confirming the receipt of the export proceeds by the lien bank.

The central bank pays the incentive after an internal audit by the exporter's bank. Sources in banks, C&F agents and exporting companies said that in case

of fake exports, exporters and their C&F agents often use a front office in the "importing" countries. These front offices sometimes collect remittance from Bangladeshi migrant workers living in those countries for sending back home, offering them higher cash incentives than those given by the government.

Posing as buyers, they then send the money through the exporter's bank, showing it as export proceeds.

"The money they send is in fact remittances of Bangladeshi expatriates," said one source, which was echoed by two other sources.

In case of the identified fake exports, the destinations were Malaysia, United Arab Emirates, Singapore and Saudi Arabia - countries where millions of Bangladeshi migrants live.

Asked, the customs commissioner said they were clueless how the export proceeds entered the country. "It needs an in-depth investigation. We requested the NBR and Bangladesh Bank to investigate it."

Md Serajul Islam, executive director and spokesperson of Bangladesh Bank, said a BB team visits the exporting company office for verification before disbursing any incentives.

"There is no scope for availing incentives by showing fake exports. There are scopes for investigating how the money entered the country without exporting goods. The law also has provisions to act against the bank and the audit firm concerned for their involvement in any illegal payment," he said.

Girl dies by suicide after attempted gang rape

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogura

A 17-year-old college student died by suicide in Dhunat, Bogura early yesterday, three days after an attempted gang rape by her neighbours. She died at the ICU of Rajshahi Medical College Hospital.

Her father filed a case accusing Babul, 40, and Rafiqul Islam, 45, of trying to rape his daughter on Tuesday four others of helping the two, police said.

According to the complaint, Babul and Rafiqul stalked the girl on her way to college. She passed the HSC exams this year with GPA 5.

On Tuesday morning, when the girl was alone in the house, the two accused entered her room and tried to rape her, threatening her with sharp weapons. They left after she started screaming.

Police arrested Babul and another accused, said Kripa Sindhubala, officer-in-charge of Dhunat Police Station, adding that they were raiding different places to arrest the other suspects.

Man hacked to death in front of wife

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

A 40-year-old man was hacked to death in front of his wife in Bhatpara area of Narail's Lohagara early yesterday.

Police said the man, Sohail Khan, was a listed criminal who had been on the run for years. He was accused in at least 13 cases, including four for murders, and he had many enemies.

Abu Hena Milon, officer-in-charge of Lohagara Police Station, said he was accused of killing two local Awami League leaders and a leader of a pro-BNP body.

Police and locals said Sohail and his wife were standing in front of his father-in-law's house after midnight when several young men appeared at the scene and stabbed him multiple times before running away. He died on the spot.

Police said they were looking for the killers.

8 Rohingyas held while fleeing Bhasan Char

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Noakhali

Eight Rohingya men were detained in Subarnachar upazila of the district while escaping from Bhasan Char on Thursday night.

Ziaul Haque, officer-in-charge of Subarnachar Police Station, said locals stopped the Rohingyas who were on a boat and called the police.

Legal action would be taken in this regard as per the decision of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner, he added.

Harry, Meghan visit Queen Elizabeth en route to Netherlands

AFP, London

Britain's Prince Harry on Thursday visited his grandmother Queen Elizabeth II with his wife Meghan before going to the Netherlands for the Invictus Games, a spokesperson for the couple said.

The Sussexes are on their way to the sporting event Harry founded for disabled military veterans that starts in The Hague on Saturday.

3 arrested

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"Rimon and his men shot again and my daughter and I were shot and fell to the ground. The bullets hit my daughter's whole body, including her eyes, mouth, and head, and she was bleeding profusely."

Locals took them to the Noakhali Hospital from where they were shifted to Dhaka. Tasfia died on the way.

Jaher's brother-in-law Humayun Kabir filed a case with Begumganj Police Station, accusing 17 people. At least 12 were unnamed

and Rimon was the main accused, said Mir Jahidul Haque Rony, officer-in-charge of Begumganj Police Station.

He said police have so far arrested three people in the case - Emam Hossain Swapan, 30, Jasim Uddin Babar, 23, and Daud Hossain Robin, 18.

However, they could not yet catch Rimon, OC Rony added.

Hajipur Union Parishad Chairman Shah Azim told The Daily Star that there are several cases against Rimon,

a resident of the upazila's Durghapur area. The locals have become angry over his criminal activities.

Nazmul Hasan Rajib, additional superintendent of police (Begumganj circle), said multiple teams of police have been working to arrest others involved.

Relatives of the deceased said Jaher returned home on Thursday afternoon with his daughter's body.

When her body reached their home, her relatives blocked Chaumuhani Feni road demanding justice.

Russia strikes Kyiv missile factory

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holed up in the city's fortress-like steelworks.

Moscow, which invaded Ukraine partly because of deepening ties between Kyiv and Nato, yesterday warned of unspecified "consequences" should Finland and Sweden join the US-led defence alliance.

The two countries are considering joining Nato after Russia's devastating invasion of neighbouring Ukraine.

"They will automatically find themselves on the NATO frontline," Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

Shortly afterwards, Finland's European Affairs Minister Tytti Tuppurainen said it was "highly likely" that her country would apply for Nato membership.

Unlike Sweden, Finland neighbours Russia, from which it declared independence in 1917 after 150 years of Russian rule.

Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev warned Thursday that Russia would

deploy nuclear weapons close to the three Baltic states and Scandinavia if Finland or Sweden decided to join Nato.

Russian forces last month started withdrawing from around the Ukrainian capital as they are redeployed to focus on territory in the east of the country, but the city remains vulnerable to missile strikes.

"The number and scale of missile strikes against targets in Kyiv will increase in response to any terrorist attacks or sabotage committed by the Kyiv nationalist regime on Russian territory," Russia's defence ministry said.

The Washington Post yesterday reported that Russia had warned the United States that there would be "unpredictable consequences" if Washington keeps arming Ukraine.

"We call on the United States and its allies to stop the irresponsible militarization of Ukraine, which implies unpredictable

consequences for regional and international security," the Post quoted Russia saying in a diplomatic note to the United States.

Seizing the eastern Donbas region, where Russian-backed separatists control the Donetsk and Lugansk areas, would allow Moscow to create a southern corridor to the occupied Crimean peninsula.

In Geneva, the UN refugee agency said that more than five million people have now fled Ukraine since the Russian invasion, in Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II.

Moscow on Thursday accused Ukraine of sending helicopters to bomb a village in Russia's Bryansk region - not far from the border with Ukraine - injuring eight people.

Later the same day, the head of Russia's Belgorod region said a village close to the border was shelled by Ukraine, while residents from this and a nearby village had been evacuated as a precaution.