

# First e-gates of S Asia open in Dhaka airport

RASHIDUL HASAN

Passengers who have e-passports can now use e-gates and complete their immigration within a short time at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

After inauguration of the e-gates yesterday, passengers went through those, and one could finish the immigration process in around 18 seconds, said Group Captain Kamrul Islam, executive director of the HSIA.

Monirul Islam, additional IGP, Special Branch, and Brig Gen Sadat, project director, e-passport project, were present at the inaugural event.

With the launching of the e-gates, long wait of e-passport holders to finish their immigration formalities has come to an end.

Twelve e-gates have been installed in the departure area and three in the arrival area.

On June 6, the immigration process was successfully completed through e-gate on a pilot basis.

Apart from HSIA, six e-gates each have been set up at Shah Amanat International Airport and Osmani International Airport. But those are yet to be operational.

The government has planned to set up 50 e-gates at all the airports and land ports across the country under the "E-Passport and Automated Border Control Management Project".

Mokabbir Hossain, secretary of Security Services Division under the home ministry, recently told The Daily Star that outbound and inbound passengers could zip through immigration formalities at the country's main gateway via the automated border control system.

"Passengers don't need to stand in queues for long, as the e-gates will open automatically for the people with e-passports."

Bangladesh is the first country in South Asia to launch e-gate for e-passports.

The camera attached to the e-gate will identify the passenger automatically after analysing information with the e-passport chip. The process ensures high security during the verification of travel documents.

The government launched the e-passport programme and automated border control management in January 2020, aiming to make the immigration process easier and enhance the acceptability of Bangladeshi passports abroad.

In June 2019, e-gates were set up at the HSIA as part of the government's move to launch e-passport. The immigration officials were imparted training on operating the e-gates.



Ride-sharing motorbikes wait for passengers at the Zero Point in the capital's Gulistan around noon yesterday. Many commuters say they don't avail the service as drivers would not accept trips on mobile apps. Drivers, however, claim that their income drops significantly if they operate via mobile apps.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

# PM calls for austerity again

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday urged the people to take austerity measures amid high inflation and price hike of goods across the world due to the Russia-Ukraine war and the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Yes, it is true that prices of goods have shot up to some extent. But it is still uncertain how much the prices would soar further. It is not only in Bangladesh, but also throughout the world. Rather we've been able to keep these under control at least [to some extent]. We've been trying our best," she said.

The premier was addressing a discussion online from the Gono Bhaban.

Bangladesh Awami League arranged the discussion at its central office in the city's Bangabandhu Avenue marking the historic Six-Point Day. Hasina, also the AL president, chaired it.

She said this war doesn't seem to end soon. "We all have to be economical. We'll have to pay attention so that food does not get wasted."

The shipping cost of goods went up from US\$ 800 to US\$ 2500-US\$ 3,000, she said.

Pointing to the readymade garment workers' movement to raise salary, the premier said they might lose their jobs if any unrest is created in the sector in this

tough time when the purchasing power of the people is declining in the export markets of Bangladeshi clothes.

"I think the matter should be informed to the workers and their leaders," she said.

The labour leaders will not face any trouble as they will get a good amount of money from instigators. "But what will be the fate of workers? They will be affected for taking to the streets."

Hasina said her government increased the salary of the apparel workers on several occasions. A worker now gets Tk 8,000-Tk 10,000 a month and other facilities, but the salary was only Tk 1,600 in the past, she added.

She said the government has been providing subsidies in different sectors. It has given all sorts of incentives to the garment sector. "It is not possible to provide more than that," she added.

As the government helped the factories preventing their closure for Covid-19, now they get work orders, their exports increase and they can import capital machinery, she said.

The PM said if anyone wages movement leading to the shutdown of the factories, the job would also be lost. "If you don't understand it, we have nothing to do here. Because how much more can we give to the private sector?" she said.



# China seeks MoU ASAP

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Moreover, the ambassador expected that an MoU would be inked between the two governments in "near future" to embark on the high-speed rail project under the G2G-PPP framework.

Under the G2G-PPP arrangement, Bangladesh may request other governments to provide financial support and select state-owned or private entities to act as the investors.

No project under the G2G-PPP arrangement has yet to be implemented in Bangladesh. Discussions with several countries, including Japan and South Korea, have been going on to implement some projects under this model.

The Chinese proposal came at a time when prominent transport experts questioned the viability of such a huge-investment project. Some of them said BR lacks capacity to complete this "highly ambitious" scheme. Even, the railways minister himself told The Daily Star last year that the government would "go slow" with the project due to the massive cost involved.

"Instead of investing the huge amount of money for the high-speed railway, we found investment in other projects is more crucial ... We are giving emphasis on other infrastructure projects," Sujan said on October 31.

In March this year, the project evaluation committee led by the

rail secretary decided to seek opinions from the railways minister whether BR will send the DPP of the proposed project to the Economic Relations Division for funds.

The Daily Star could not confirm if the committee took the steps as the minister, secretary and additional secretary (development and planning) were not available for comments.

According to the International Union of Railways, speed of the high-speed rail would be at least 200km per hour for upgraded tracks and 250km per hour or faster for new tracks.

The world's fastest public train connects Shanghai's Pudong airport of China's Shanghai with Longyang Road Station in the city centre and it has a maximum commercial speed of 460km/hr, says a CNN report of December last year.

The 10 fastest trains of the world are being operated at 300 to 460km/hr in China, Japan, Germany, France, Japan, Morocco, Spain, South Korea, Italy and Saudi Arabia, according to the report.

The work for India's first high-speed train project is underway between Mumbai and Ahmedabad and the bullet train will be operated at a speed of 320km/hr, according to Indian newspapers.

In Bangladesh, once the high-speed rail project is implemented, the journey on the 224.64km

route between Dhaka and Chattogram via Narayanganj-Cumilla-Feni will take 55 minutes if uninterrupted, and 73 minutes with stopovers. The travel time is currently more than six hours.

It will, however, not be cheap. With the fare expected to be over Tk 2,000, more than three times the fare of an AC seat on existing Bangladeshi inter-city trains. Minimum air fare from Dhaka to Chattogram is Tk 3500.

Approximately 50,000 passengers will be transported each way daily while the bullet train will run at up to 300km/hr.

**THE PROJECT** Sheikh Hasina, while visiting the railways ministry on October 23, 2014, issued several instructions, including taking steps for operating high-speed train (bullet train) between Dhaka and Chattogram.

More than 90 percent of the country's seaborne trade is being handled by the Chattogram port.

Dhaka-Chattogram highway is considered the life line of the economy as it carries more than 80 percent of the external trade but the contribution of the railways is very low compared to this.

Following the PM's instruction, BR has already completed a feasibility study and detail design of the project, spending Tk 110.16 crore. A joint-venture firm led by a Chinese company carried out the study and opined that the project would be

economically viable with economic international rate of return is 15.18 percent.

If implemented, it will be the second costliest infrastructure project of the country after the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant being built at Tk 113,092 crore.

Apart from CREC, two other Chinese companies -- China Railway Construction Corporation and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation -- expressed interest in forming a joint venture to construct, operate and manage funds for the high-speed rail project under a PPP model.

BR held a meeting over the joint venture proposal in March last year and decided to seek opinion from the Economic Relations Division in this regard. However, no visible move followed.

Transport expert Prof Moazzem Hossain thinks this is an "ambitious project" with some extent of risk, if the country's present economic situation is taken into consideration.

"I would not say such a project should not be initiated. But it depends. Such a project can be undertaken if the economic growth continues for the next six to seven years. But if the economy slips, then this amount of money itself could be a huge burden for the country," he said.

"In that sense, it is a risky project," he told The Daily Star on May 21.

Replying to another question, he said,

"Consequence would be same -- be it an investment project with [foreign] loan or under PPP. Ultimately, the government has to bear the liability."

**SIGN MOU ASAP: CHINESE ENVOY**

In his letter to the railways minister, Chinese ambassador mentioned a virtual meeting held between them on October 14, 2020, when "a preliminary agreement" for the project implementation through G2G-PPP was reached between two sides.

He said CREC has submitted its "letter of interest" to the ministry recently to develop the high-speed rail project.

CREC is involved in the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project and Chattogram-Cox's Bazar Rail Link Project, two fast-track projects implemented by BR.

The contractor of Padma Bridge is also a subsidiary of CREC.

CREC is the leading company for design and construction of railway in the word and the company is active in Bangladesh since 1990s, the ambassador said.

The ambassador termed CREC an "ideal partner" of railways ministry for implementing the project and suggested an MoU be signed for cooperation on the project between BR and CREC as soon as possible.

He requested the ministry to provide "needful supports" to CREC to facilitate the feasibility study, financing construction and operation

of the project.

The ambassador also wrote that with the MoU on G2G-PPP between China and Bangladesh being signed in the near future, "we can surely expect" that the project would be developed under the G2G-PPP framework.

BR sources said the if CREC is given the charge of the project implementation, they will prepare a plan to use the high-speed corridor for operating freight trains, besides passenger trains, by lowering the speed at around 200km/hr.

Upon receiving the letter, the railways minister sought BR's opinion over the matter and BR recently sent their opinion, sources said.

Contacted, Habibur Rahman, additional secretary (development and planning), asked this correspondent to talk to a BR official.

The official said they informed the ministry that no such MoU is required to be signed with the company as the Public Private Partnership Authority (PPPA) has specific procedures regarding G2G-PPP framework.

This correspondent tried to talk with Railways Secretary Humayun Kabir going to his office on May 25 but could not manage an appointment. The secretary could not be reached over phone either.

He tried to meet the railways minister in his office the next day but to no avail. The minister was also not available on phone.

# Journalist held in DSA case

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police yesterday arrested the editor of Dainik Parbatta Chattogram, a Rangamati-based daily, in a case filed under the controversial Digital Security Act.

The arrestee, Fazle Elahi, was held in the evening, said Kabir Hossen, officer-in-charge of Rangamati Police Station.

Elahi is also the district correspondent of several other media outlets.

Naznin Anwar, daughter of former lawmaker (reserved seat) Firoza Begum Chinu, lodged the case with Cybercrime Tribunal last year over a report published in Dainik Parbatta Chattogram on DC Park irregularities, he said.

The OC said they received the arrest warrant from the tribunal yesterday.

# Dengue cases jump in June

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 109 dengue patients were hospitalised in the first week of June alone, an alarming spike.

Seventeen dengue patients were admitted to hospitals across the country in 24 hours ending at 8:00am yesterday, said the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS)

So far this year, 463 dengue patients were hospitalised.

Of them, 75 are still undergoing treatment and 388 have recovered.

Warning the city corporations of a major outbreak this year, experts suggested that the corporations take extensive measures immediately to control Aedes mosquitoes, the carrier of the virus.

Dhaka is at risk of a major dengue outbreak this year, according to a pre-monsoon survey of the DGHS conducted between March 23 and April 4.

The survey found three Dhaka South City Corporation wards to be at "high risk" and 10 at "medium risk" of an outbreak. Nine wards in Dhaka North City Corporation are at "medium risk".

# Trader kidnapped in Patuakhali

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Criminals abducted a trader in Rangabali upazila of Patuakhali on Sunday night and demanded a ransom of Tk 1 lakh.

Nizam Fakir, brother of victim Swapan Fakir, 32, who sells lentil, filed a general diary with Rangabali Police Station on Monday.

Swapan's family claimed that he went to nearby Galachipa upazila town on Friday to sell lentil. He got Tk 2.5 lakh from the sale and took it with him when he left home around 4:30pm on Sunday.

He had called for a motorbike ride at 9:45pm to get home from North Charalta area. But the bike rider found his phone turned off when he reached North Charalta to pick up Swapan.

At 11:48pm, Swapan called his sister Hosnara Begum. He told her that he had been kidnapped and that the abductors wanted Tk 1 lakh for his release.

"Sister save me. I can't say where he is taking me. I'm blindfolded," he was quoted as saying.

There has been no communication with Swapan since then.

# Target more export

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Another comfort for Bangladesh comes from the fact that the country's export-oriented items are consumed mostly by low and middle-income groups in the destination countries.

"We don't produce high-value items much. Our exports will not be affected," Kamal said, adding that the country's export earnings would hit \$50 billion this fiscal year.

Owing to higher import bills against moderate exports and slower remittance inflow, Bangladesh's foreign currency reserves have taken a hit recently.

Kamal, however, said, "The reserves are still at a comfortable level. And we will soon raise it to \$50 billion."

As prices of essentials are likely to stay at higher levels in the coming months, the government has decided to support one crore families hit hard by raging inflation that rose to an 18-month high in April.

"We are initiating safety net projects. The

beneficiaries will not have to come to us to seek aid. Rather, we will take measures so that they can get the assistance in the convenience of their homes," said Kamal, referring to money transfers through mobile financial services.

The finance ministry official said the total allocation for the safety net programmes might be Tk 113,000 crore or 2.5 percent of the GDP. The bill on the universal pension scheme is also likely to be placed in the budget session.

The official further said that in the next fiscal year, the government may offer opportunities to bring back the money that was generated in Bangladesh but was laundered abroad.

Under the facility to be offered for the first time, those who transferred money abroad through trade under-invoicing may get the chance to bring it back by paying 7 percent tax as penalty, said the official.

"This scope will be available only for the next fiscal year."

# WB revises down

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highest in Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Pakistan.

"With already high energy costs and the uncertain outlook, the region could face additional pressure on inflation -- despite the dampening effect of subsidies -- and larger current account deficits.

"This pressure could undermine growth, increase poverty, and divert budgetary resources away from productivity-enhancing investment and social protection."

Rising energy prices, given the region's high dependency on energy imports and elevated energy subsidies in some economies, could further undermine growth and threaten a widening of fiscal imbalances, reads the report.

Stronger-than-expected rebound from the pandemic helped Bangladesh boost activity through early 2022.

In Bangladesh, goods exports have grown by over 25 percent so far this fiscal year.