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CRISES IN SRI LANKA

President fails to flee

Seeks seaborne escape ahead of resignation today; protesters reject all-party govt

AGENCIES

Sri Lanka's president headed to a naval base yesterday with a view to fleeing his island by ship following a humiliating standoff at the airport, official sources said.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa has promised to resign today and clear the way for a "peaceful transition of power" following widespread protests against him over the country's worst economic crisis.

The 73-year-old leader fled his official residence in Colombo just before tens of thousands of protesters overran it on Saturday. He then wanted to fly to Dubai, officials said.

As president, Rajapaksa enjoys immunity from arrest, and he is believed to want to go abroad before stepping down to avoid the possibility of being detained.

But immigration staff at Bandaranaike International withdrew from VIP services on Monday and insisted that all passengers must go through public counters.

The presidential party was reluctant to go through regular channels fearing public reactions, a security official said, and as a result, missed four flights that could have taken them to the United Arab Emirates.

Attempts to arrange a military flight to a neighbouring country also failed as clearance to land was not immediately available, the official added.

The president and his wife spent the night at a military airbase next to the airport.

A top defence source said the president's closest military aides were discussing the possibility of taking him and his entourage overseas aboard a naval patrol craft.

"The best option now is to take the sea exit," the defence official said. "He could go to the Maldives or India and get a flight to Dubai."

The group left the airbase yesterday afternoon in two Bell 412 helicopters, an airport source said, bound for the northeastern port of Trincomalee, site of the naval base where Rajapaksa initially took refuge after fleeing his palace on Saturday.

Another option was to fly from Hingurakgodia air base where the choppers stopped to refuel, an air force source said, adding it had a runway that could accommodate executive jets.

Rajapaksa's youngest brother Basil, who resigned in April as finance minister, missed his own Emirates flight to Dubai early yesterday after a tense standoff with airport staff.

Basil — who holds US citizenship in addition to Sri Lankan nationality — tried to use a paid concierge service for business travellers, but airport and immigration staff said they had withdrawn from the fast track service. "There were some other passengers who protested against Basil boarding their flight," an airport official told AFP. "It was a tense situation, so he hurriedly left the airport."

Basil had to obtain a new US passport after leaving his behind at the presidential palace when the Rajapaksas beat a hasty retreat to avoid mobs on Saturday, a diplomatic source said.

Official sources said a suitcase full of documents had also been left behind at the stately mansion along with 17.85 million rupees (about \$50,000) in cash, now in the custody of a Colombo court.

Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan protesters are occupying the President's House, the presidential secretariat, and the prime minister's official residence since Saturday in growing anger over the island nation's unprecedented economic crisis.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has also offered to quit once an interim all-party government being discussed among the political parties to resolve the crisis is formed.

However, protesters have rejected an all-party government and said they will not vacate the government buildings until the president and the prime minister officially resign.

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A man waves Sri Lanka's national flag after climbing a tower near the presidential secretariat in Colombo yesterday after it was overrun by anti-government protesters.

PHOTO: AFP

Three new bridges usher in new hope

Construction close to completion; inauguration likely in months

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

After the grand opening of the Padma Bridge, the country is set to see the inauguration of three other major bridges in three to four months, which is expected to give a big boost to the internal communication and beyond.

The new bridges — Bekutia Bridge in Pirojpur, Kalna Bridge in Narail and 3rd Shitalakhyia Bridge in Narayanganj — are being built under the network of Roads and Highways Department (RHD).

The Road Transport and Highways Division in its last monthly meeting on June 12 asked the RHD to take necessary steps for inauguration ceremonies as the construction of the bridges had neared completion.

The latest development is the construction of Bekutia Bridge, formally known as 8th Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge, is done. The authorities have started preparation for inaugurating the bridge, which will establish direct road link between Barishal city and Pirojpur.

The construction of Kalna Bridge, the first six-lane bridge in the country, is expected to be completed next month. This aesthetically beautiful bridge, which will fill up the last missing link of Asian Highway-1 route, will be ready for



use in September.

The 3rd Shitalakhyia Bridge, the long-delayed project, will establish direct road link between Narayanganj city and Bandar upazila. It is expected to be ready for use in October.

"Once the three bridges are opened to traffic, it will increase the efficiency of RHD's network further," said Shishir Kanti Routh, RHD's additional chief engineer responsible for the Bridge Management Wing.

He said the "continuous twin box girder" structure has been used for the Shitalakhyia Bridge, for the first time in the country, while the Kalna Bridge is the longest "arch bridge" in Bangladesh.

"So, with the construction of the bridges, the RHD has gained

the experience of long-span bridge construction technology, which will have positive impacts on future projects," he told The Daily Star last week.

RHD is building the bridges with foreign loans and grants.

BEKUTIA BRIDGE

RHD in October 2017 undertook the project to build the bridge over the Kacha river. Currently, people have to use ferries to cross the river.

The cost of the project is Tk 894 crore, of which China will provide Tk 654 crore as grant and thus the bridge is named 8th Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge.

However, physical works of the project started in July 2018.

The main structure of the 1,493m

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Journey to the edge of the universe

Lamiya shares experience as a member of the Webb telescope team

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Lamiya Ashraf Mowla, a Bangladeshi-born astrophysicist, is a proud part of NASA's James Webb Space Telescope team.

The telescope yesterday produced the deepest and sharpest image of the universe to date.

The image of far-flung galaxies as they were 13 billion years ago promises to reshape our understanding of the dawn of the universe.

US President Joe Biden, who unveiled the image at a White House event, called the moment "historic" and said it provided "a new window into the history of our universe".

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Webb telescope reveals mysteries of early universe

AFP, Washington

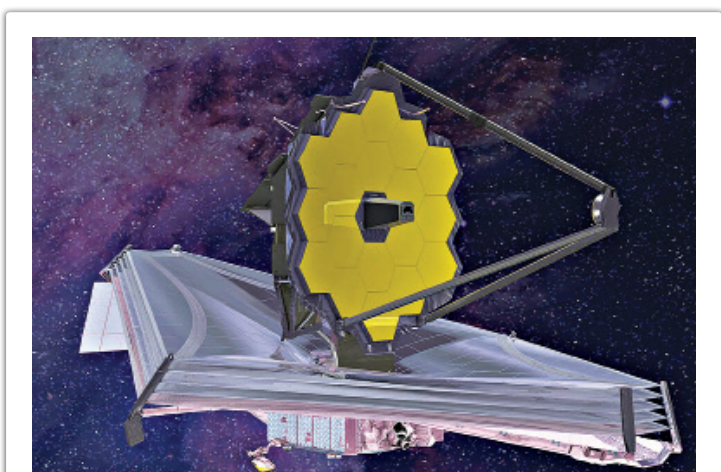
Humanity's view of the distant cosmos will never be the same.

The James Webb Space Telescope, the most powerful to be placed in orbit, has revealed the clearest image to date of the early universe, with light as old as 13 billion years, US space agency Nasa said Monday.

The stunning shot, released in a White House briefing by President Joe Biden, is overflowing with thousands of galaxies and features some of the faintest objects observed, colorized in blue, orange and white tones.

Known as Webb's First Deep Field, it shows the galaxy cluster SMACS 0723, which acts as a gravitational lens, bending light from

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Curbing inflation top priority

Says new BB governor

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Reining in inflation, stabilising the volatile exchange rate and shoring up the foreign currency reserves are among the major priorities for keeping the economy afloat, newly appointed Bangladesh Bank Governor Abdur Rouf Talukder said yesterday.

Both the government and the central bank have already taken some measures to contain the soaring inflation, he told journalists at the central bank headquarters after joining office as the 12th BB governor.

Inflation has gone up recently due to high import payments and an increase in commodity prices in the global market, he mentioned.

Inflation surged to an eight-year high of 7.42 percent in May, according to data from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

"I'll go the extra mile to bring back stability in the exchange rate," he said.

The exchange rate of the taka stood at Tk 93.45 per dollar yesterday in contrast to Tk 84.80 a year ago.

"My third priority is to strengthen the foreign exchange reserves so that we have reserve assets enough to settle import bills for more than six months," he said.

The country's foreign exchange reserves rose to \$48 billion at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, he pointed out.

Rouf said the country had to spend an additional \$9 billion to import nine products, including petroleum,

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Abdur Rouf Talukder