

## US ended its assistance to Rab in 2018 Says US state dept

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Responding to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent comments that the US created and trained Rab, the US State Department has said it stopped providing assistance to the force in 2018 due to its human rights violations.

"Well, the fact is that based on credible information implicating the Rapid Action Battalion or the Rab in gross violations of human rights, we did end assistance to the Rab in 2018," State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in his regular press briefing in Washington DC on Wednesday.

He made the remarks when a journalist asked him about the Bangladesh PM saying, at a press conference on October 6 after her return from the UNGA, that the US created Rab and provided training, logistics and arms, and that now they are acting according to their training.

Price added that in December last year, the US sanctioned Rab as well as seven current and former officials under Global Magnitsky Act in connection with the force's involvement in serious and gross human rights abuse.

He said whether it is in Bangladesh or anywhere else in the world, the US has placed human rights at the centre of its foreign policy.

"And we are committed likewise to drawing attention to and putting a spotlight on those who are responsible for human rights violations when they occur."

He also said these sanctions and visa restrictions aim to promote accountability and reform for the Rab and to deter human rights abuse globally.

"And just as we hold these actors accountable, we'll continue to partner with countries to develop their own capacity to fight crime, to administer justice, and to safeguard the rule of law. Our training to Bangladesh security forces promotes these very principles."

Replying to the journalist's

SEE PAGE 4 COL 7



People visit the graves of fallen Ukrainian soldiers at Lychakiv Cemetery in Lviv, marking Ukraine's Defenders Day yesterday. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky promised victory over Russia as his country celebrated its first Defenders Day public holiday since the start of Moscow's invasion almost eight months ago.

PHOTO: AFP

## Imminent revival of Iran nuke deal unlikely

Says US as Washington-Tehran rift widens over anti-hijab protests

AFP, Washington

The United States has ruled out any imminent revival of the Iranian nuclear deal, issuing a downbeat assessment of long stalled talks over the 2015 accord as unrest continues to rage across the Islamic republic over the death of a woman in police custody for allegedly violating the strict dress code for women.

The landmark JCPOA deal has been in tatters since then-president Donald Trump withdrew the United States from it in 2018 and Iran later backed away from some of its own commitments.

On off talks have been underway since 2021 to revive the deal, which gave Iran much-needed sanctions relief in return for curbs on its nuclear program.

"It's not that we don't want to see the JCPOA reimplemented, we of course do. We're just not in a position where... that's a likely outcome anytime in the near future," White House spokesman John Kirby told reporters.

"What we're focused on is holding the (Iran) regime accountable for what they are doing to these innocent political protesters."

His comments come after Iran's ultra-

conservative President Ebrahim Raisi on Thursday again accused arch-enemy the United States of seeking to destabilise the Islamic republic.

"Following the failure of America in militarisation and sanctions, Washington and its allies have resorted to the failed policy of destabilisation," he said.

Nearly four weeks after Masha Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd, was detained in Tehran for "inappropriate attire", the protests show no sign of abating in a bold challenge to Iran's clerical rulers, even if the unrest does not seem close to

SEE PAGE 4 COL 8

## Farmers kick-start a freshwater machine

FROM PAGE 1

land subsidence resulting from it.

"It is a ground-breaking research for all sorts of reasons," exclaimed the lead researcher Mohammad Shamsudduha over the phone from London Thursday.

Published a month ago in the renowned journal *Science*, six scientists -- five of whom are Bangladeshi -- wrote in their research paper about a great water reservoir below Bangladesh that hardly runs dry. The more water is pumped out of the "Bengal Water Machine", as the researchers called it, the more water is pumped into it

north west have gone for extensive irrigation that enabled Bangladesh to produce enough food each year to be nearly self-sufficient by tripling the country's rice production.

The geological formation of this Bengal basin responded strangely to the overdraw of the groundwater, with greater depletion triggering faster recharge.

"If there was no pumping, then there would have been no water machine functioning," said co-researcher Professor Kazi Matin Uddin Ahmed, who is a hydrogeologist at the University of Dhaka. "When farmers extract more groundwater,

amounting to 75-90 cubic kilometres were captured and pumped back into the water machine from 1988-2018. Still, there's a huge shortfall.

The withdrawal recharge ratio is not that encouraging and consistent among all regions of Bangladesh. The rice-producing north is precariously placed. On the other hand, the west generally experiences less rainfall than the east and it reflects on the outcome. Groundwater depletion is taking place in the west but not in the east, finds research.

"Apart from the rice producing north, the Bengal Water Machine is also not working well in the



Mohammad Shamsudduha

Kazi Matin Uddin Ahmed



Md Izazul Haq



Anwar Zahid



Sara Nowreen



Richard G Taylor

the water level falls and it creates room for additional recharge."

Boosting yields aside, the natural water system is believed to have been helping lessen flooding during monsoon seasons. "If there is no recharge, all the water would be on the surface. Then, we would have a bigger flood," said Matin.

The entire ecosystem works like a well-oiled machine: farmers pump water out and the porous soil quickly captures the rain-running-flood water before sending it down to the water machine with filtration through layers of soil on the way. Freshwater is stored in reservoirs at different depths, with the majority amount easily accessible by farmers at 100 feet below.

About 1,500-2,000 litres of groundwater are required for the production of only one kg of rice in the dry season. And the amount of groundwater that is being pumped in three months for irrigating Boro paddy is mind-blowing.

According to a World Bank study in 2021, about 32 cubic kilometres of groundwater is being extracted by the farmers every year, with which a three-story "water building" could be built over Bangladesh.

The Bengal Water Machine was created but not quite started until the 1980s, when Bangladesh stepped up on its rice production in the dry season. Unknowingly, millions of farmers actually kick-started the natural water system by pumping out groundwater for irrigation.

Equipped with pumps and agricultural improvements, drought-hit farmers in the north and

greater Dhaka region, big cities, and industrial areas," said co-researcher Prof Anwar Zahid, also a director at the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB).

"We must use the groundwater very judiciously and cautiously, looking at the data. Indiscriminate use will only make a disaster imminent," warns Anwar, the leading groundwater expert and a key resource person behind the research that spanned over 10 years.

The reason why the research is being so hailed across the globe is because of its foundation, a trove of data painstakingly put together over 30 years by the BWDB.

Over a thousand observers of the BWDB wells have been monitoring and recording the underground water levels for 60 years by now. And, the researchers used millions of groundwater measurements from 465 shallow monitoring wells (mostly at 25-70 meters depth, from where pumping for irrigation is done).

"Groundwater deeper than that level should not be used for irrigation as recharge by rainfall to that level [over 250-300 meters] takes the ruling party candidate to make written statements that the polls were free and fair."

The other researchers are Richard G Taylor from University College London, Md Izazul Haq and Sara Nowreen.

## Workers' lives on the edge

FROM PAGE 1

Tejgaon, saw her monthly income drop by Tk 1,500 because her employers have been closing the factory early since July.

"I get Tk 8,000 a month. I used to earn an additional Tk 1,500 by working till 8:00pm. But now my factory closes at 4:00pm," she said.

She has to spend Tk 3,000 for rent and her husband, who is in his 70s, has to go out looking for work again.

"A few months ago, each of us used to eat two chapati and a cup of tea for breakfast. It cost us Tk 30 as the price of a chapati was Tk 5 and a cup of tea Tk 5. The price of chapati has risen to Tk 10 and a cup of tea to Tk 6.

"Now we eat one chapati each with a cup of tea. But I feel hungry after 11 in the morning. I wait desperately for lunch break to go home and eat rice with either mashed potato or lentil.

"My husband scavenges discarded things, but he cannot work for a long time. He earns Tk 50-100 a day."

"What else can we do? Even vegetables are now too pricey for us. We don't know what lies ahead," she said.

Babul Hossain is a senior welder and his wife a cleaner at a factory in

Tejgaon industrial area.

"High-voltage electricity is needed for our production. But we get the required voltage only for a few hours in the afternoon and after midnight. Our production is suffering a lot and all the workers lost a significant part of their income," he said.

"We had to move our home to a shanty and cut short our food expenditure as things have become unaffordable. Most unfortunately, I had to ask my mother to look for work as a domestic help. Unless we get financial support from her, it would be extremely difficult for us to continue our three children's education," added an anxious Babul.

Tobarak Ali, foreman of a chemical factory in Tejgaon, said he moved to Keraniganj to be able to pay the rent.

"Now I have to leave for work by 5:00am. By the time I return home after work, the clock hits 10:00pm. The struggle has already taken a heavy toll on my health," he said.

UP AGAINST THE WALL

Labour leaders said the workers should get financial assistance from the government.

"We have lost much of our income and many of us have incurred debts,"

said Mizanur Rahman, leader of an association of metal and welding workers.

Kalpona Akter, executive director of Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity, said, "Rising inflation and shrinking salary have pushed the workers to their limits."

She said the government brutally suppressed the RMG workers' demonstrations for a raise in June but did nothing to help the workers survive.

Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation, a government body, should come up with a programme to help the workers through the tough time, she said.

Contacted, Mollah Jalal Uddin, director general of the foundation, said, "We can provide assistance only to the workers who fall under the four categories defined by the Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation Act, 2006."

Kalpona Akter, however, said frustration among workers was intensifying day by day.

"The government should take immediate measures to rescue the workers whom we call the backbone of our economy," she said.

## Forced to write down election was free, fair

FROM PAGE 1

statement that the election was held in a peaceful manner. I had no other option but to comply," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked whether he sought support from the law enforcers, Moshiur said, "There were only four police personnel at the polling station and it was not possible for them to hold off such a big crowd. So, I called the on-duty executive magistrate."

The presiding officer said the magistrate asked him to call the patrol team of law enforcers. "Later, four policemen from the patrol team came in, but the number was still not enough to tackle the situation."

Executive Magistrate Rokhsana Begum, also the UNO of Sadullapur upazila, told The Daily Star that the presiding officer called her after the polling was halted at his centre. "As I was busy with duties at another polling station, I asked him to call the patrol team."

At least four out of 16 presiding officers contacted by this newspaper claimed that they were forced by the local AL men and polling agents of the ruling party candidate to make written statements that the polls were free and fair.

Md Abdul Latif, presiding officer of the polling centre at Jadurtair Government Primary School and Jadurtair High School, said around

15-16 youths forced him to write a statement that the voting was free and fair.

"After the Election Commission suspended voting, we started preparing to return to the upazila parishad with polling materials. All of a sudden, 15-16 local youths surrounded the polling officials and started pressing me to announce the election results. I sought assistance from the police and Ansar members, but in vain. That's why I had to write that the voting atmosphere was good. I also mentioned the number of votes cast."

Another Presiding Officer Md Mahmudul Hasan said he learnt around 3:20pm that the voting was suspended, but he could not leave the centre as the polling agents of the AL candidate demanded announcement of the election results.

"Therefore, I had to write a statement and hand it over to them before leaving the centre."

Milon Kumar Pal, presiding officer of Noshirapara Government Primary School polling station, also had to submit a similar statement to the Saghatta UNO office.

He said when he returned all voting materials to the UNO office around 7:30pm, the UNO asked him to write a statement mentioning the number of votes cast. "I was also asked to write that no unlawful incidents occurred

at my polling station."

Asked why he signed the statement, Milon said, "The UNO sir asked me to do so to avoid any administrative problems in future and I complied."

Bishnu Pad Singh, presiding officer of the Barkona Government Primary School and Barkona High School polling station, said when he returned to Saghatta UNO office around 6:30pm, he came to know that over 50 presiding officers submitted written statements mentioning that the voting was free and fair. The total number of votes cast in their respective polling stations were also mentioned in those statements.

This newspaper could not reach Saghatta UNO Sardar Mostafa Shahin for comments as he didn't respond to calls and text messages.

The Daily Star also tried to contact Gaibandha Deputy Commissioner Md Walidul Rahman and Superintendent of Police Touhidul Islam for comments, but none of them picked up phone.

Kamrul Islam, assistant returning officer of Gaibandha 5 by-polls, said presiding officers submit results sheets and vouchers on the returned election materials to the EC.

He said presiding officers are not supposed to write any statement on the election atmosphere and there is no legal basis for such statements.

## Gold bars worth Tk 3.5cr seized

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Members of Border Guard Bangladesh seized 43 gold bars, worth Tk 3.5 crore, in Jashore's Sharsha upazila last night.

The gold bars weighed five kilogrammes, according to BGB officials.

Lt Colonel Tamir Ahmed, commanding officer of 21st BGB battalion, said the consignment was seized around 9:30pm.

BGB received information that three smugglers were bringing in a huge consignment of gold bars from India.

As a result, a patrol team took position on their way. Sensing their presence, the smugglers fled the scene, leaving the bag of gold behind, the CO said.

## Three bodies found in the Bay of Bengal

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Members of Bangladesh Navy and Bangladesh Coast Guard yesterday recovered three bodies from the Bay of Bengal early yesterday.

The authorities suspected the bodies might be of those who went missing in a trawler capsized in the sea.