

ALPP MEET

No objection as long as it's peaceful

Hasina says about BNP demo

RASHIDUL HASAN

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the government will tackle the BNP with an iron fist if it resorts to arson and vandalism like it did during its anti-government movement in 2013 and 2014.

Addressing an Awami League Parliamentary Party meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban, Hasina, also president of the ruling AL, said the government has no objection with the BNP's ongoing movement as long as it is peaceful, meeting sources told The Daily Star.

She added that her government will not initiate new development projects at the moment considering the country's current economic situation.

Instead, it will focus on completing all ongoing projects.

Hasina, also leader of the House, presided over the meeting that lasted for around an hour and half since 7:45pm.

Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque, who was present at the meeting, quoted Hasina as saying, "Carrying out political activities is a basic and constitutional right of any political party. We have no objection if the BNP carries out its political activities peacefully."

NEXT POLLS 'CHALLENGING'
Terming the next polls "even more challenging [than previous ones]", the PM in her speech urged her party lawmakers to go door to door.

"People usually forget about the government's various achievements and works. You will have to remind them," a lawmaker who was present at the meeting, preferring anonymity, quoted Hasina as saying.

Palestinian killed in West Bank after wounding soldier with car

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli troops yesterday killed a Palestinian after he seriously injured a soldier with a van, authorities said, as votes were counted in an Israeli general election.

The army said the man was "neutralised" in the shooting at the Maccabim checkpoint, near the Israeli town of Modiin. The Palestinian health ministry later confirmed he had been killed.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Motorcyclists virtually take over a footpath as other vehicles stop at a traffic light in the capital's Karwan Bazar yesterday.

FREE TEXTBOOKS

Govt facing a race against time

High paper price, load shedding, delay in work order hampering printing

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

The government is struggling to print textbooks in time for free distribution to primary and secondary level school students on January 1 – the first day of the next academic year.

Officials at the education ministry and the National Curriculum and Textbook Board said the printing of around 10 crore textbooks for primary students is yet to begin, while the printing of around 24 crore books for secondary level is underway.

The power crisis and unavailability of paper, however, are hampering the work, they said.

If things don't improve, the officials fear, it will be difficult to have all the books ready for distribution.

Against this backdrop, Education Minister Dipu Moni yesterday held a meeting with top officials of the education, and primary and mass education ministries, and of the NCTB.

It was pointed out that several printing companies have not signed a contract with the NCTB even after winning the tender. The meeting decided the authorities concerned would look into the rules and procedures for awarding the

work to second bidders if these printers don't go ahead with the work, meeting sources said.

After the meeting, Dipu Moni assured that the students will get their books on January 1.

"We have taken all necessary steps. I am assuring that pre-primary, primary and secondary students will get their books on time. I have personally spoken to the printers and paper manufacturers."

She said it was true that the cost of paper was high in the international market, and hoped that load shedding will come down soon.

"If needed, we will get paper from alternative sources ... Printing of books for secondary students has already begun and we hope the printing of primary level books would begin in a day or two."

The government is aiming to distribute 34 crore textbooks this academic session.

Twenty-one printers have signed a contract with the NCTB to print around seven crore primary school textbooks. Three printers have still not signed the contract.

Meanwhile, officials said the NCTB is yet to issue work orders for publishing three crore primary school textbooks.

Seventy-eight printing companies

have signed a contract to print around 24 crore secondary school textbooks. Around three crore have been printed till October 31.

The officials added that many printers have slowed down the printing process due to high paper prices and continuous load shedding.

An NCTB official said that a section of the printers always raise issues with printing on substandard paper. "It is no exception this year."

"We are hopeful the quality of textbook papers will be maintained. [But] We cannot check each and every book," Dipu Moni said.

Since 2010, the government has been distributing free textbooks to both primary and secondary level students at the very beginning of the academic session.

Between then and now, the government has been able to distribute about 400 crore free textbooks, earning praise from home and abroad.

The success has led to significant improvements in enrolment at the primary and secondary levels, as well as a decrease in the dropout rates, NCTB officials said.

College teacher lands in jail over rape of student

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogura

A Bogura court yesterday sent a teacher to jail in connection with the rape of a student.

Senior Judicial Magistrate Sumaia Siddika rejected the bail petition of Assistant Prof Zinnatul Islam Pramanik, 53, and sent him to jail, said Court Inspector Subrata Banarjee.

According to the case statement, the teacher took inappropriate photographs of her and then blackmailed her and raped her.

A couple of months ago, she became pregnant. Zinnatul met the victim at a restaurant in the district town's Jaleshwaritala area on Monday and beat her up there, the statement added.

Zinnatul was arrested on Tuesday after the victim filed the case on the same day, said Noor-e-Alam Siddiqui, officer-in-charge of Bogura Sadar Police Station.

Two sentenced to death over rape

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A Dinajpur court yesterday sentenced two men to death for raping a 19-year-old in district's Phulbari upazila in 2020.

They were also fined Tk 10,000 each. Budu Mia, 40, son of Hanifa Haji, and Sagar Hossain, 32, son of Moklesar Rahman, both residents of the upazila's Mirpur village, were arrested after the girl, a homemaker, filed a case with Phulbari Police Station on November 21, 2020, the same day the incident took place.

According to the prosecution, Sagar told her that he would help her look for transport to take her to her parents house. He instead took her to a quiet spot where he and Budu raped her.

DU student accuses BCL activist of harassment

DU CORRESPONDENT

A female DU student submitted an official complaint to the university against a Chhatra League activist for allegedly harassing her on campus, informed DU VC Prof Md Akhtaruzzaman.

According to the complaint, Jim Najmul, an activist of BCL's Dhaka University's Master Da Surja Sen Hall unit, snatched the victim's phone and slapped her multiple times while she was taking photographs in front of the Raju Memorial sculpture early Tuesday.

"Najmul was not found in his room after the authorities started looking for him," said Mohammad Moqbul Hossain Bhuiyan, the provost of the hall.

Meanwhile, Abul Bashar, a shopkeeper at Hakim Chattar, accused Najmul of snatching his money and phone on the same day.

Najmul and his cohorts had also allegedly beaten up two other students in December, last year, for being "outsiders" on campus.

Sinks further in red

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market to keep the exchange rate stable, but this has eroded the reserves to a large extent.

This fiscal year, BB supplied more than \$4.5 billion to the market. In fiscal 2021-22, it injected a record \$7.6 billion.

Hussain called for immediate withdrawal of the multiple exchange rate system that was introduced by the Bangladesh Foreign Exchange Dealers' Association, a platform of banks to implement foreign exchange-related policies in the market, in September.

The multiple exchange rate system is widening the current account deficit further.

As per BAFEDA's decision, banks are allowed to pay a maximum of Tk

107 for each dollar to remitters.

Over at the kerb market, each dollar traded at Tk 112-Tk 113 last month.

The difference means the migrant workers might have sent their money through hundi, a cross-border illegal financial transaction system that provides an exchange rate closer to the kerb market.

"This explains why the official remittance inflow figures are shrinking."

The remittance inflows are supposed to go up seeing that a record number of migrant workers have gone abroad in recent times, Hussain said.

In the first nine months of this year, 8.75 lakh migrant workers left the country, which is more than the combined numbers of 2020 and 2021.

"Between March and August, migrant workers had sent satisfactory volumes of remittances. It started falling from September," Hussain added.

Mansur fears hundi may continue to thrive and remittance may not pick up even if the exchange rate gap between the formal and informal markets is reduced due to a spike in capital flight prompted by the instability on both the economic and political fronts.

"Under such a situation, the government will face a critical situation to bring stability in the macroeconomic sector."

He, however, hopes the balance of payment situation may improve to some extent if the government manages credit support from

multilateral agencies including the International Monetary Fund.

While imports will definitely contract in the coming months as the opening of letters of credit has come down between July and September, the declining trend in export and remittance poses a major worry, said Mansur, a former economist of the IMF.

Export earnings may not rebound in the next couple of months thanks to the economic slowdown in the major markets of North America and Europe, said Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

If imports fall, the GDP growth will face a setback, Hossain said.

"The economy is now in a difficult situation," he added.

RHD eyes 174 acres

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National Economic Council (Ecne) approved the Tk 848 crore project in August 2020 to widen the road from 5.5 metres to 7.3 metres.

The project doesn't have permission from the environment ministry and no assessment of its environmental impact was done, officials said.

Pintu Chakma, executive engineer of RHD in Chattogram, said, "We took the initiative to widen the road at the recommendation of high-level officials of the government. Goods will be shipped between India and Bangladesh using this road."

"We hope that we will get the forest department's clearance."

Deforesting the 174 acres will violate the Forest Act-1927, National Land Use Policy, National Forest Policy and a Cabinet Division circular from 2015, experts said.

In 2018, a land ministry circular requested the deputy commissioners not to lease out any protected and reserved forests.

Besides, Bangladesh committed at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties last year to stop deforestation by 2030.

Section-18 (ka) of the Bangladesh constitution says the government will take steps to maintain and conserve

the environment and biodiversity for the present and future generations.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, chief executive of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association, said, "The road through the forest is already a threat to the forest and wildlife. If the road is widened, forestry crimes will increase."

Mohammad Kamal Hossain, former professor of the Institute of Forestry and Environmental Science at Chittagong University, said, "Development is necessary, but it shouldn't come at the expense of our forests and wildlife. Development is possible while protecting the forests. We need proper plans made by forest scientists and construction engineers."

Forest officials in Chattogram said widening the road would surely lead to illegal settlement in the reserve forest.

In a report submitted to a parliamentary body in February 2021, the forest department said over 1.60 lakh individuals and organisations grabbed 2.57 lakh acres of forest across the country.

Of the total grabbed land, 1.38 lakh acres of reserved forests were occupied by 88, 215 individuals and organisations.

LPG price up by Tk 51

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for motor vehicles) was increased too to Tk 58.28 per litre from previous price of Tk 54.33 per litre, up by Tk 3.95 per litre.

The new price came into effect from 6:00pm yesterday.

Jalil informed that the US Dollar rate was considered at Tk 106.25 in refixing the price of the LPG as private operators import it from Middle East through foreign currency.

He said though the LPG price has substantially come down in the global market, consumers are not getting full advantage of the downward trend due to the high dollar price in the

local market.

Last month, the dollar exchange rate was considered Tk 106.64.

The price of LPG, marketed by state-owned LP Gas Company, will remain as usual as it is locally produced with a market share of less than 5 percent.

The LPG price went up to the highest Tk 1,439 per 12kg cylinder in the local market, following the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in February this year.

The LPG price was the lowest at Tk 1,225 for a 12kg cylinder in January this year and it witnessed continuous hikes in February, March and April.

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Kishoreganj-3, wanted to know if the government would take any initiative for unity among all political parties to face the economic crisis.

The PM questioned why such feelings are not expressed by the opposition parties.

"When there's a crisis throughout the world, we should not be trying to create political instability and fish in troubled waters."

Hasina said her government was not sitting idle. "Many people continue blasting the government, but they don't stand by the people."

She said unity is not just a word. Everyone will have to come forward spontaneously. "We believe in unity. We'll work together with whoever comes forward."

Answering another supplementary question from BNP MP Rumeen Farhana, Hasina suggested that the

lawmakers stand by the people.

The prices of commodities have shot up following the war and sanctions, and people across the world are taking the brunt, she said.

Referring to reports of the Centre for Policy Dialogue and daily Prothom Alo, Rumeen asked what steps the government is planning to control the inflation, as food prices are the highest in Bangladesh among the South Asian countries, and Bangladesh is among the 42 countries that may face famine.

To that, Hasina said everyone should consider the price hike of essentials from the world market perspective.

"I'm not denying that prices have increased. Since the prices have gone up, we are providing goods at subsidised rates to those who cannot afford."

Responding to a supplementary question from Gonoforum lawmaker Sultan Muhammed Mansur Ahmed from Moulvibazar-2, Hasina said Bangladesh is still in a better position than even many developed countries amid the economic recession.

PM BLASTS MEDIA

Hasina said she never reads the newspaper Rumeen mentioned, as this paper is always on the other side.

"They never want the democratic process to continue in Bangladesh. They like an unusual situation as they are better off then and their demand increases in that situation."

Without mentioning the name of CPD, the PM said, "And the organisation you [Rumeen] mentioned, I don't know from where they get the statistics. The statistics they provide are never correct."

"That organisation does not like anything. They liked it when there

was military rule and when there was a caretaker government as their stature had rose a little back then. The reality is that they are waiting for that."

She added that in every case, some newspapers now make headlines in a way that are misleading. They do not give correct information. They provide misleading information.

Hasina said, "We are with the people and will stand by them. Let them say what they will. And I will do what I need to do."

She mentioned that the government was working to ensure punishment to those involved in spreading propaganda against the country and the government staying abroad.

The premier was replying to a question from Awami League lawmaker Nur Uddin Chowdhary Nayan from Laxmipur-2.