

# Bring Russia, Ukraine to table to end conflict

## Hasina urges world leaders



UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday made an appeal to world leaders to bring Russia and Ukraine to the table for dialogue and end their conflict.

“I call upon the world leaders and all others to stop the Russia-Ukraine war,” she said.

The PM was speaking at the inaugural session of a two-day seminar on International Women Peace and Security.

Armed Forces Division, the foreign ministry and Bangladesh Police organised the event at the Army Multipurpose Complex in Dhaka Cantonment.

Hasina said if there is any conflict between countries, it can be resolved through dialogue and political discussion.

“We don't want any war. We don't want to see any human being living a life of a refugee. Because I have that kind of experience. That's why we want peace.”

Stressing the need for women empowerment, the premier said women are the most vulnerable section of the society and they suffer most during any conflict and disaster.

“It is beyond question that women are the most vulnerable section of the society, especially in the third world countries. They suffer from various forms of violence, malnutrition, illiteracy and other basic needs. Their plights multiply during any conflict and disaster,” she said.

Hasina said that to address the peace and security issues of women, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution number 1,325 which established the Women Peace and Security agenda, and Bangladesh is proud to be a part of the resolution's formulation.

She said Bangladesh since its independence has been working on promoting women in all spheres of

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Japan is the largest bilateral development partner of Bangladesh. It has provided about \$27 billion in grants and loans to Bangladesh since 1971. Japan is currently implementing some of the major infrastructure projects. The two countries are willing to elevate the relations to a strategic level during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Japan. Japanese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Ito Naoki, shared his views with Porimol Palma of The Daily Star.

# Tokyo, Dhaka should enhance security co-op

### Says outgoing Japanese ambassador Ito Naoki in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star



**TDS:** The prime minister's visit to Japan scheduled for November 29-December 2 has been postponed. Why?

**Naoki:** We are working on the visit because it will be immensely beneficial for us to deepen our friendship. We still have a lot of room for developing our partnership and cooperation for peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. I hope the visit will take place sooner rather than later and elevate our partnership.

**TDS:** You have recently talked about the 2018 election's ballot box stuffing and become the talk of the town.

**Naoki:** It is not only me. All the like minded countries' missions here hope that there will be free, fair and participatory elections. I have been talking to all the interlocutors of mine during my assignment here. I expect in light of the efforts by the Election Commission and others concerned, the next elections will be better.

**TDS:** What does it mean to take the relations to a strategic level?

**Naoki:** In 2014, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the then Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe launched a comprehensive partnership. Since then, the friendship has developed and Japanese overseas development assistance to Bangladesh has exceeded the \$3 billion mark. It is 10 times higher compared to the amount 10 years ago. So, our partnership needs to reflect the development. Also, Bangladesh's stature has been enhanced in the region. In the twin celebrations last year -- the birth centenary of Bangabandhu and golden jubilee of

Bangladesh -- it [Bangladesh] took initiatives of regional connectivity, free trade, and offered assistance to Sri Lanka for economic management. Clearly, Bangladesh is playing a bigger role. Also, in the changing strategic landscape, we need to step up our cooperation on security. I think that will be something new in our relationship.

**TDS:** Can you elaborate on the security cooperation?

**Naoki:** We need to expand the exchange of officers, co-training, port calls by the self-defence naval ships. In January this year, two Japanese self-defence ships paid port calls to Chattogram. That was the curtain raiser of the golden jubilee celebrations and they need a goodwill exercise with the Bangladesh Navy. Also, Bangladesh Air Force is showing strong interest in procuring mobile radar systems from a Japanese company. And, you also need to diversify the source of procurement of defence equipment. Already, the basis of cooperation is there for security and defence areas. So, once we can elevate our partnership to a new height, we can have this new type of cooperation between the two countries. Also, cyber security and ICT security are areas where Japan

and Bangladesh should explore the possibility of collaboration.

**TDS:** Japan is advancing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. How will you engage Bangladesh in it and what is Dhaka's response?

**Naoki:** We regard Bangladesh as Japan's partner in FOIP. Under this vision, we have three pillars: shared values, pursuit of economic prosperity and cooperation on peace and stability. Shared values are democracy, market economy, respect for rules-based systems, free and open navigation. These are the values both Bangladesh and Japan respect and try to promote. And, as the landscape of security is changing and the situation is becoming even more challenging now, there is a good reason for us to cooperate and collaborate. In all of those pillars, we share our ideas so that we can promote pragmatic cooperation and pursue the FOIP.

**TDS:** What does practical cooperation include?

**Naoki:** Practical cooperation includes quality infrastructure building, regional connectivity, disaster management and prevention, maritime safety, capacity building of law enforcement officials, humanitarian assistance and climate change. For example, we are providing support to the development of Matarbari Deep Sea Port, metro rail, third terminal of Dhaka airport, an economic zone in Araihazar etc. I would stress that FOIP is an inclusive vision, not intended to contain or exclude any country.

**TDS:** What are the challenges facing the policy?

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# Verify news on banks in social media, newspapers

### Cabinet asks authorities

UNB, Dhaka

The cabinet yesterday directed the authorities concerned to verify the accuracy of the videos and news seen on social media and newspapers about the current situation of the banking sector.

The direction came at the cabinet meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the chair at the PMO, said Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam, while briefing the media at the Secretariat.

The cabinet secretary said different types of videos are being seen on social media about the current situation of the banking sector.

“An explanation has been sought from the authorities concerned ...,” he added.

Meanwhile, after the secretaries' meeting on Sunday, the cabinet secretary told reporters that there was an indirect discussion about this and instructions were given to the banking and finance division to expose the real situation, added Anwarul.

# Woman gang-raped by fiancé's friends

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barishal

A madrasa teacher, an imam of a mosque, and a college student landed in jail yesterday on charges of gang-raping a woman engaged to one of their friends and filming the incident.

Abid Hasan alias Razu, a teacher of Jamiya Kasimia Madrasa in Rupatoli area of Barishal city; Abu Sayem Hawladar, imam of Baitul Mamur Mosque in Babujanj upazila; and Hruday Fakir, a student of BM College, were sent to jail by a court after police arrested them. They are aged between 25 and 40.

They were arrested after the woman filed a case with Airport Police Station in Barishal early yesterday, said its OC.

According to the complaint, one of the accused called the woman over the phone on September 28 and told her that her fiancé was in a relationship with another woman.

As the woman did not believe it, the accused asked her to come to a house and walk in on her fiancé and the other woman. When the woman went there, they confined her to a room and gang-raped her.

They also filmed the incident on a phone and threatened to upload the video on social media if she told anyone. Blackmailing her, the three accused raped her on multiple occasions over the last two months.

Recently, they also demanded money from her. As she refused, they sent the video to her fiancé's father, the complaint said.

# Traditions stay alive

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It was the type of game that cannot be gauged from watching highlights. Apart from showcasing different shades of tactical and technical prowess, the two recent world champions stayed true to identities established over the ages.

When Germany legend Franz Beckenbauer, who led his side to glory in 1974 edition, said “German football will be unbeatable for years to come” after his country clinched the 1990 World Cup, it was tough to dispute the statement. While only a solitary World Cup has fallen into their lap since, in 2014, the mean German machine have been perennial title contenders, almost always sealing at least a semifinal berth.

Spain, who claimed the biggest prize in 2010, may not possess a clinical striker or the typical flair that can sweep fans off their feet, but they are the best at what they do: controlling the game in midfield and building from the back.

To counter Spain, Germany dropped their first-choice marksman in Kai Havertz and opted to overload the midfield with the addition of Leon Goretzka.

Hansi Flick's charges were well aware that the 90 minutes would pan out like a chess game -- at least in the initial phases when pawn structure is prioritized. Spain's young midfield of Gavi and Pedro brilliantly operated like knights, countered somewhat by the experience of Ilkay Gundogan and Joshua Kimmich. But the duel between 19-year-old Jamal Musiala and Spain's youngsters offered another treat to savour.

It was commendable that, despite ending with a meagre 30-odd per cent possession at half-time and going a goal down at the hour mark, Germany still had the nerves and firepower to force Spain out of their comfort zone as the clock ticked towards the endgame.

Substitute Leroy Sane added threatening pace from the wings and the game moved beyond the chess board to one involving sheer nerves and physicality. Ultimately, a deserving equaliser arrived from the most unlikely of sources in Niclas Fullkrug, a completely unknown face in the German national set-up at the age of 29.

The final minutes witnessed the German steam-roller activated to near full-force while Spanish players, perhaps lacking a Plan B, became more possession-obsessed than ever.

Now, the two European powerhouses are now on a quest to keep traditions alive, re-establish their identity and make it as far as they can in Qatar.

# Floods, more subjects

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be no dignity [in other schools], while some think their children would get no education unless they can study in those [popular] schools. This mentality needs to change.”

Hasina said many a noted dignitary and others holding respected positions in the country have studied at district-level schools.

“Such schools should not be neglected,” she said.

### LOW PASS RATE

Unveiling the results at a press conference in the capital, Education Minister Dipu Moni said 15,88,657 students took the SSC exams this year, from September 15 to October 1, after a seven-month-long delay.

The delay, she said, was due to the Covid-19 pandemic and floods in Sylhet and other regions.

Of the examinees, 88.10 per cent passed, which is significantly lower than last year's 94.08 per cent, while 2,33,763 students got GPA-5 -- higher than last year's 1,63,840.

Taking into account the Dakhil exams under the madrasa board and SSC vocational tests under the technical board, the combined pass rate was 87.44 per cent -- a big fall from last year's 93.58 per cent. Meanwhile, 2,69,602 students got GPA-5 -- 86,262 more than last year's 1,83,340.

Prof Tapan Kumar Sarker, chief of the Inter-Education Board Coordination Committee, said the pass rate came down as students were tested on a higher number of subjects than last year.

In 2021, SSC candidates took exams on only three optional subjects. This year, they had to sit for Bangla, English, mathematics and a fourth subject, besides the three optional ones, said Tapan, also chairman of the Dhaka Education Board.

Board officials also pointed out that the pass rate of the Sylhet board, which was 78.82 per cent, was another reason for the overall drop, as it held the lowest position among the nine boards.

Prof Md Kabir Ahmed, secretary of Sylhet Education Board, gave three reasons behind the poor results this year.

“First, [there was] the flood. Many students lost their books, while many others had to take refuge at shelters. We handed them the books needed, but it [the natural disaster] still affected them and their results. Then, there were online classes due

to the pandemic, during which many underprivileged students [with no internet access] fell behind.

“And finally, even though they have the better result every year, many girls had to drop out [from school] during the lockdown period and were married off.”

Tapan said many students achieved GPA-5 this year as the syllabuses were shorter and they had enough time to prepare.

Jashore Education Board scored the best, with a 95.17% pass rate, among all nine education boards, while Dhaka board topped in terms of GPA-5 achievers.

### GIRLS LEAD AGAIN

Once again, the girls outshone the boys in terms of both pass rate and GP-5 achievement.

They took the lead in terms of pass rate for the sixth year in a row with 88.42 per cent this year.

For the fifth consecutive year, the number of girls with GPA-5 was higher than that of the boys. This year, 131,304 girls achieved GPA-5, a staggering 28,845 higher than that of boys.

Meantime, 50 institutions had zero per cent pass rate, while last year the number was 18.

Dipu Moni said the government will look into the matter of zero per cent pass rates.

### DAKHIL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION BOARD

This year, 82.22 per cent of some 2.60 lakh Dakhil examinees under the madrasa board have passed, while last year it was 93.22 per cent.

Of some 1.45 lakh candidates of SSC (vocational) and Dakhil (vocational) exams, 89.50 per cent have passed. Last year, it was 88.49 per cent.

A total of 15,457 madrasa students and 18,655 technical students got GPA-5.

Last year, 14,313 madrasa students and 5,178 technical students had achieved it.

At least 363 Bangladeshi students attended eight foreign exam centres and 348 of them have passed.

At a recent press conference, Dipu Moni said that only the public exams of regions that were hit by natural disasters, including floods, will be postponed, meaning exams in other regions will continue.

She also hoped the university authorities will take steps to lift the restrictions on the age limit for higher education at the institutions.

# Govt wrests control of energy pricing

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introduced in neighbouring India in 2017 with great success, has long been a demand of economists and multilateral lenders due to the inefficiency of the existing subsidy-reliant administered pricing mechanism.

Other than distorting the prices, the artificially low price at the cost of taxpayers' money benefits the rich and poor alike, and it is largely the well-off who are major consumers of energy. That money could instead be used in the health and education sectors and for making the social safety net schemes meaningful.

Keeping populism in mind, the government has so far resisted a shift away from administered pricing and continued to bear progressively larger subsidy bills. A record Tk 82,745 crore has been earmarked for subsidy in this fiscal year's budget, up 53.7 per cent from the previous year's original budget.

“We have looked at the pricing formula in other countries,” Hamid said, adding that the automated pricing mechanism would be applied to gas, electricity and fuel prices.

Asked if the move is part of prior actions for the prospective \$4.5 billion loan package from the International Monetary Fund, he said: “No, we were considering it from before.”

The amendment to the BERC Act 2003, which was approved in the cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, would also enable the government to set an effective tariff for both the industries and the general public.

“We have to think sector-wise. We have to provide uninterrupted gas supply to industries and also provide electricity to people at competitive rates -- we have to strike a balance and also come out of subsidies.”

Gas supply to industries is being rationed after the government halted the spot purchase of liquefied natural gas following a steep rise in price in the global market and strain on foreign currency reserves. This has hit industrial output.

“The factory owners have said they are willing to pay the international price, so we are allowing the private sector to import both fuel and LNG. Alongside BPC [the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation], the private sector will distribute fuel,” Hamid added.

The move would avert the industrial energy crisis from escalating and derailing Bangladesh's growth momentum.

The summary provided to the cabinet from the energy division said the amendment to the BERC Act 2003 -- last done in 2020 -- is necessary “for the sake of the economic growth in progress”.

Adjusting the electricity and gas prices by following all the procedures mentioned in the laws and regulations is a complex and lengthy process, said the summary signed by Md Mahbub Hossain, senior secretary to the energy division, on November 14.

In the current global context, to ensure an uninterrupted electricity and energy supply, the prices of electricity, gas and petroleum products need to be adjusted “fast and on a regular basis” in line with the international market.

Subsequently, the draft of the ordinance made an addition to Clause 34 (3) of the BERC act that authorises only the commission to determine tariffs: “but with condition that the government could fix the tariff by publishing government gazette until the commission wouldn't form the regulations”.

And another sub-clause will be added to ensure the government's authority to fix the energy prices by the government itself, according to the summary.

“An implementing agency will now be able to fix the prices of power and energy -- it is a brutal attack on the basic principle of the law,” said M Shamsul Alam, a prominent energy expert.

The BERC Act 2003 was formed to ensure the protection of consumers and create a competitive market. The process of building a permanent structure of a regulatory body started after the law was formed in 2003.

“And with the new decision of having an ordinance, there will be no existence of such a structure. Now, there will be a monopoly in business. As a consequence, consumers will not get any protection,” said Alam, also the vice-president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh.

At present, BERC follows a quasi-judicial process to adjust gas and electricity prices, said Ghulam Rahman, the president of CAB.

“People can express their opinions -- this opportunity will now be lost,” he added.

Khandker Anwarul Islam, cabinet secretary, however, said BERC will continue to adjust prices as before but under special circumstances, the government would intervene.

“Sometimes, immediate need for price adjustment emerges -- say, if a price drops significantly in the world market. BERC's process cannot address the need in good time. By necessity, the government would fix the energy tariff then.”

Asked what construes as special circumstances, Islam said: “The current situation is a special circumstance... taking the situation into consideration the government could adjust the price

within a day or two.”

Since there is no parliament session, the ordinance has been brought before the cabinet for quick implementation, said an additional secretary of the cabinet division on the condition of anonymity.

It will be in effect through a gazette notification, he said, adding that the notification will be issued soon.

“This does not appear to be a step in the right direction,” said Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office.

The argument that it takes too long for BERC to make price changes in line with changes in import prices also applies to petroleum pricing, which BERC does not regulate, he said.

But fuel prices remain sticky downwards.

“There is, therefore, no guarantee that allowing the energy ministry to set prices through gazette notification will enable more timely response of domestic prices to changes in import prices.”

The scenario would be different if an automated pricing mechanism is adopted.

“This will eliminate the exercise of arbitrary bureaucratic discretion in energy pricing and make factors contributing to changes in domestic prices of energy more transparent,” he added.

The government took full control of energy pricing and it could be on the IMF's recommendation, said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute.

The ordinance will first be applied in the case of electricity tariff.

From next month, the electricity price at the producers' end would be 19.92 per cent more, and the six state-owned distributors have applied to BERC to hike prices at the consumers' end.

Now, this will most likely come into effect sooner than allowed under BERC's jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, the cabinet also discussed allowing private companies to import fuel and LNG, Islam told the press briefing.

The government is mulling whether it will be better to allow private companies to import refined oil and sell it to the market directly or crude oil.

After refining the crude oil, they could either sell the oil to BPC or market directly.

The government will have to bring amendments to the respective act to allow them to sell the refined oil to the market directly and they will also have to get clearance from the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution.

“However, no concrete decision has been taken yet,” Islam said.