

India, Pakistan FMs trade barbs at UN

AFP, United Nations

India's foreign minister accused Pakistan of being the "epicentre of terrorism" while his counterpart hit back that Narendra Modi was the "Butcher of Gujarat" in a war of words at the United Nations.

The nuclear-armed rivals have strained political ties, especially over the Himalayan region of Kashmir, which was split between the two during Partition in 1947.

New Delhi accuses Islamabad of harbouring militants who launch attacks on its soil, including the 2008 Mumbai attacks that left scores dead.

The latest exchange of taunts happened on the sidelines of an urgent meeting of the United Nations Security Council in New York across Wednesday and Thursday.

Indian foreign minister S Jaishankar told Pakistan to "clean up your act and try to be (a) good neighbour", calling Pakistan the "epicentre of terrorism".

"Hillary Clinton, during her visit to Pakistan, said that if you keep snakes in your backyard you can't expect them to bite only your neighbours, eventually they will bite the people who keep them in the backyard."



In response, Pakistani foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said India sought to conflate Muslims and terrorists in both countries.

He told Jaishankar that "Osama bin Laden is dead, (but) the Butcher of Gujarat lives and he is the prime minister of India".

India's Hindu nationalist leader Modi was chief minister of the state of Gujarat when sectarian riots in 2002 left more than 1,000 people dead.

Modi has been accused of turning a blind eye to the violence, and until his election was denied entry to the US.

Bhutto Zardari said his country had lost far more lives to terrorism and that he himself was a victim, referring to his mother Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated by a suicide bomber in 2007.

"Why would we want our own people to suffer? We absolutely do not."

Responding to the exchange, the spokesman for India's foreign minister said it was a "new low even for Pakistan", while quipping that "Made in Pakistan" terrorism had to stop.

Pakistan this week accused India of backing militants responsible for the 2021 bombing in Lahore near the house of an Islamist leader which killed four people.



Protestors gather during a national demonstration to demand more measures against the rising cost of living, organized by the three national trade unions, in Brussels, Belgium yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

China braces for Covid spread to countryside

Journalists' deaths reported

REUTERS, Beijing

Two veteran Chinese state media journalists have died from Covid-19 in the capital Beijing in recent days, media said yesterday, among the first reported deaths since the government abandoned its strict "zero-Covid" policy of curbs and lockdowns.

Reports of the deaths came as China set out urgent plans yesterday to protect rural communities from the virus as millions of city-dwellers planned their Lunar New Year holidays, starting on January 22, for the first time in years.

Yang Lianghua, 74, a former People's Daily reporter, died on Thursday, while Zhou Zhichun, 77, a former China Youth Daily editor, died a week earlier, financial magazine Caixin said, citing their families.

China's national health authority has not reported any official Covid deaths since dismantling some of the world's toughest domestic epidemic control policies on December 7. The last official deaths were reported on December 3, in Shandong and Sichuan provinces.

China's move last week to start aligning with a world that has largely opened up to live with the virus followed unprecedented protests against President Xi Jinping's signature "zero-Covid" policies designed to stamp out Covid.

Pacifist Japan approves major defence overhaul

Unveils \$320b plan in biggest build-up since WWII

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan yesterday unveiled its biggest military build-up since World War Two with a \$320 billion plan that will buy missiles capable of striking China and ready it for sustained conflict, as regional tensions and Russia's Ukraine invasion stoke war fears.

The sweeping, five-year plan, once unthinkable in pacifist Japan, will make the country the world's third-biggest military spender after the United States and China, based on current budgets.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who described Japan and its people as being at a "turning point in history", said the ramp-up was "my answer to the various security challenges that we face".

His government worries that Russia has set a precedent that will encourage China to attack Taiwan, threatening nearby Japanese

islands, disrupting supplies of advanced semiconductors and putting a potential stranglehold on sea lanes that supply Middle East oil.

"This is setting a new heading for Japan. If appropriately executed, the Self-Defense Forces



will be a real, world-class effective force," said Yoji Koda, a former Maritime Self Defense Force admiral, who commanded the Japanese fleet in 2008.

The government said it would also stockpile spare parts

and other munitions, expand transport capacity and develop cyber warfare capabilities. In its postwar, American authored constitution, Japan gave up the right to wage war and means to do so.

"Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a serious violation of laws that forbid the use of force and has shaken the foundations of the international order," the strategy paper said.

"The strategic challenge posed by China is the biggest Japan has ever faced," it added, also noting that Beijing had not ruled out using force to bring Taiwan under its control.

A separate national security strategy document that pointed to China, Russia and North Korea, promised close cooperation with the United States and other like-minded nations to deter threats to the established international order.

MALAYSIA LANDSLIDE

21 killed, 12 missing

REUTERS, Batang Kali

A landslide killed at least 21 people, including children, while they slept in their tents at an unlicensed campsite in Malaysia yesterday, officials said, as search teams scoured thick mud and downed trees for survivors. The landslide in Selangor state bordering the capital, Kuala Lumpur, occurred before 3:00 am (1900 GMT), tearing down a hillside into an organic farm that officials said was operating the campsite illegally. Among the victims were five children, 12 women, and 12 people were still missing, according to the fire and rescue department. The disaster struck about 50 km north of Kuala Lumpur in Batang Kali, just outside the popular hilltop area of Genting Highlands, known for its resorts, waterfalls and natural beauty. The earth fell from an estimated height of 30 metres and covered an area of about an acre, according to the fire and rescue department's state director. The farm owners did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Two of its workers, who are Myanmar nationals, told Reuters they managed to escape with others after being roused by neighbours, just minutes before the farmhouse was destroyed. "I have never seen such a horrible incident. I feel so shocked and terrified," said Thawng Uk. "We could bring nothing at all as we urgently ran ...". His colleague Kung Tuang, 31, said he was afraid they would lose their jobs now that the farm had been destroyed.

Trapped in the 'Game Ghor' BR goes for massive

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"But my son was not released. I tried calling Sharif but found his number switched off for the last 20 days," he said.

"When I asked Raju, he said his captors told him they only received a payment of Tk 2.5 lakh," said Aminul.

According to investigators, Raju is not the only prisoner at the Game Ghor.

At least 300 Bangladeshis are presently held hostage there, said the human trafficking wing of the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit.

A Bangladeshi named Sharif Hossain is the ringleader. He has around 40 agents spread across the country, who allure their victims with the hopes of a better life in Europe.

For the journey, the criminals charge each person around Tk 9.5 lakh. They don't stop there, as they go on to collect a hefty payment as ransom after the migrants reach Libya.

CTTC officials first came to know about the racket on November 4 this year following the arrest of two Bangladeshi members.

Last month, CTTC arrested four more members, including Sharif's sister-in-law, who oversaw the ransom payments.

Sharif's wife Sumona Sumi, a key member of the racket, however,

managed to flee to Libya on November 30, said officials.

The six arrestees are now in jail.

Tohidul Islam, the additional deputy commissioner of the CTTC unit, said, "We have come to know that several hundred Bangladeshis are currently trapped in the Game Ghor."

He explained that the number increased because the traffickers were unable to send these individuals to European nations because of the recent tightening of their border security.

"We are now writing to Interpol seeking assistance in rescuing the Bangladeshi migrants and arresting Sharif and his wife from Libya," added Tohidul.

THEY CALL IT GAME Investigators said that the racket has managed to extort crores by torturing the fortune seekers in the last two years.

ADC Tohidul said after analysing a total of 70 accounts (both bank and MFS) kept by the racket members, they discovered transactions worth around Tk 5 crore between January 2021 and November this year.

The syndicate chooses the sea routes for transporting people from Libya to Europe. Sometimes the boat sinks into the sea, and the migrants are unable to reach their destinations.

For this reason, the racket calls it a game.

Twitter suspends

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journalists who cover you," Sarah Reese Jones of news commentary website PoliticusUSA said in a tweeted response to posts about the suspensions.

Checks at Twitter showed account suspensions included reporters from CNN, The New York Times, and The Washington Post as well as independent journalists.

"The impulsive and unjustified suspension of a number of reporters, including CNN's Donie O'Sullivan, is concerning but not surprising," the news organization said in a tweet.

Mild cold wave

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around those areas, he said.

However, there is no chance of Dhaka facing a cold wave this month but the temperature is likely to fall further in the last week of December.

People of low-income groups in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country are the worst affected.

In Rajshahi, Salauddin Al Wadud, the district relief and rehabilitation officer, said they need at least 1.5 lakh winter clothes to distribute among those in need but have so far received 56,850 clothes, which they have distributed in unions and municipalities.

BR goes for massive

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said a top BR official, wishing anonymity.

Until 2017, BR had been recruiting employees - grade 10 to 20 - under Bangladesh Railway Non-Gazetted Service Recruitment Rules-1985 though it was annulled in June 2013 following a High Court verdict, said officials.

The HC declared illegal the seventh constitutional amendment that had legitimized the military rule of Hussain Muhammad Ershad. The 1985 rules were cancelled as they were enacted during Ershad's regime.

Unaware of it, BR continued to recruit employees from June 2013 till 2017, and some 4,000 employees were recruited during this period. Knowing about the order, BR stopped the recruitment process, sources said. Later, following the direct intervention of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, BR and the railways ministry prepared the new rules that got the final approval in November 2020.

Meanwhile, BR got 47,637 post organogram, but could not start the recruitment till early this year. Sources said BR and the ministry expedited the process after the prime minister's instruction.

BR sources said 54 guards and 241 assistant loco-masters have joined their jobs. The agency also issued appointment letters to 587 for assistant station masters and completed the process of appointing 864 pointsmen.

They added that these four jobs were very vital for railway operation and that's why people were being recruited there first.

A BR official said they received the railways ministry's approval for appointing people to 7,700 posts in 17 categories, but the number might cross 8,000 as many posts would fall vacant before issuing circulars.

However, the recruitment of additional manpower will put more financial burden on BR, which is incurring losses.

BR incurred Tk 13,492.70 crore losses in 12 years between fiscal years 2008-09 and 2019-20, according to BR documents.

EC, Finance Division at odds

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The section says the government shall allocate a budget, in consideration of the proposal received from the Election Commission, for the expenditure of the Election Commission in each financial year.

And it shall not be necessary for the Election Commission to take the government's prior approval in case of expenditure from that allocated budget.

"The Election Commission will again write a letter to the Ministry of Finance highlighting its legal position," Ahsan Habib told this newspaper. It has to be checked whether the Finance division can change the EC proposal, he added.

Secretary of Election Commission Secretariat Jahangir Alam refused to make any comments regarding the issue.

The Office of the Controller and Auditor General (CAG) first raised the issue in March 2020, after detecting financial anomalies in the EC's expenditure on payment to its trainers ahead of the last parliamentary polls

'Why is my bail being denied?'

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"We want her name dropped from the case as soon as possible," he said.

On Thursday, DB chief Mohammad Harun Or Rashid said they did not find Bushra's involvement in the incident and would let the court know about this matter.

Fardin, a third-year student of the civil engineering department of Buet, was found dead in the Shitalakkhya river in Banani Ghat area on November 7, three days after he had gone missing.

Meanwhile, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan yesterday said the detectives and Rab members came up with full details about the death of Fardin after analysing all the issues related to it.

"I think our Rab and DB police have nicely explained all the matters [regarding Fardin's death]. If you want to know anything about it, you can ask them," he said in response to a query

and upazila elections.

The CAG's objection involved more than Tk 7 crore over the training programme.

Electoral Training Institute officials said they usually provide training to the presiding officers, assistant presiding officers and polling officers ahead of national polls, and local government polls. In most cases, election commissioners and EC top officials provide the training.

The Daily Star collected a copy of the Finance Division letter to the EC sent in October.

EC guideline proposed a training allowance of Tk 7,500 for the CEC and other ECs for a 90-minute session. The Finance Division scrapped the allowance, saying they get certain benefits under the Privilege Act to perform their duties.

The EC proposed Tk 6,000 and Tk 5,000 as allowance for Course Director and Course Coordinator but the finance division scrapped those.

ETI officials said the CEC, ECs and top officials of the EC secretariat, including its secretary, conduct training

from journalists at Rajarbagh Police Lines.

After over a month of investigation, the Detective Branch of police and the Rab on Wednesday said Fardin died by suicide after jumping off a bridge into the Shitalakkhya river, where his body was found.

The Rab earlier claimed that Fardin might have been killed in Narayanganj's Chonpara by local drug dealer Raihan Mahmud and his gang members.

His father Kazi Nooruddin, however, firmly believes that his son didn't die by suicide.

"My son cannot kill himself. He was murdered in a planned way and all this drama was staged afterwards..." the father said on Thursday.

Meanwhile, a group of Buet students yesterday went to Rab Headquarters in Uttara to get details about the death of their peer. They

went there around 3:30pm and came out at 7:00pm.

One of the students Tahmeed Hossain said, "We spoke to the investigating officers at the DB office on Thursday. They clarified certain things while some other things could not be clarified.

"Rab today told us how the plot changed during the investigation. Rab spoke about a place first. Why did they mention that place [Chonpara] and how did that place of occurrence later changed? How did Rab confirm the new findings?... All these issues are put in front and thoroughly said."

Earlier on Thursday, after meeting with the DB investigators, the students said that there are some gaps and ambiguities. Those need to be clarified.

They added that the DB officials could not show any solid or concrete evidence that Fardin indeed died by suicide.

Several EC top officials confirmed that the audit objections were yet to be settled.