

INTERNATIONAL

India makes inroads into crisis-hit Lanka

REUTERS, Colombo/New Delhi

When Sri Lanka slid into its worst economic crisis in seven decades leading to deadly riots and alarming shortages of fuel, food and medicines earlier this year, its giant northern neighbour stepped into the breach.

India provided about \$4 billion in rapid assistance between January and July, including credit lines, a currency swap arrangement and deferred import payments, and sent a warship carrying essential drugs for the island's 22 million people.

Now, as Sri Lanka closes in on a \$2.9 billion loan deal from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its economy stabilises, India is seeking to land ambitious long-term investments, with an eye on countering the influence of regional rival China, a government minister and three sources said.

"What we are looking at right now is investment from them," Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry said in an interview this month, referring to a range of projects worth over \$1 billion currently under discussion that would help bolster India's presence in Sri Lanka. "They're willing to invest as much as it takes."

Regional security would always be a focus for New Delhi, a source with knowledge of the matter told Reuters, at

a time of persistent friction with China along their Himalayan frontier.

Besides seeking Indian investments to set up renewable energy and power projects in the north of the island, Sri Lanka is also keen to work with New Delhi on expanding and developing the harbour at Trincomalee in the northeast into a major port, several officials said.

Taking advantage of northern Sri Lanka's proximity to India, these projects could help New Delhi balance China's extensive infrastructure projects in the south of the island that have been built up over the last 15 years.

The scale of Indian aid this year which far exceeds other donors underlines New Delhi's efforts to claw back influence in the island located just a few miles off its southern tip along busy waterways linking Asia to Europe.

Despite India's crucial help during the financial crisis this year, Sri Lanka still needs China - one of its biggest creditors - to agree to a debt restructuring plan, along with India and Japan, to clinch the IMF loan deal, Sri Lankan officials said.

"Chinese investment is very important, Chinese relationship is very important," Sabry added.

"So I don't think even India or anybody expects Sri Lanka not to work with China. To be fair by them, none of them have asked us."



Russia's President Vladimir Putin (C), Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon (L), Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2nd L), Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov (R) and Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko (2nd R) enter a hall of the State Russian Museum during an informal summit of the heads of state of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Saint Petersburg, Russia, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

New Delhi fog disrupts air and rail travel

REUTERS, New Delhi

Low temperatures and fog in New Delhi hit air and rail movement yesterday morning as a cold wave gripped the Indian capital with minimum temperatures dipping as low as 5.6 degrees Celsius (42 F).

With visibility of just 50 metres (164 ft) in some areas, Delhi Airport took to Twitter to alert passengers that flights not equipped to operate in such conditions "may get affected".

Local media reported that 15 trains to Delhi were also running late because of fog. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) said in a bulletin that "dense and very dense fog" was likely to continue over some parts of the city over the next 24 hours.

The IMD also forecast cold wave conditions in some areas over the northwest states of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi during the next two days.

A cold wave is declared in the plains of India when the minimum temperature dips to 4 degrees Celsius or falls 4.5 degrees Celsius below normal to 10 degrees Celsius or below.

Fighting rages in east Ukraine

Russia says war can but on its terms; 9m Ukrainian left without power

REUTERS, Kyiv/Bakhmut

Russian forces shelled and bombed towns and cities in eastern and southern Ukraine yesterday, a day after Russia's foreign minister said Kyiv must accept Moscow's demands for ending the war or else suffer defeat on the battlefield.

Those demands include Ukraine recognising Russia's conquest of a fifth of its territory. Kyiv, armed and supported by the United States and its Nato allies, has vowed to recover all occupied territory and to drive out all Russian soldiers.

Britain's defence ministry said in its latest update of the military situation in Ukraine that fighting was particularly intense around the strategic eastern city of Bakhmut in Donetsk province and Svatove, further north in Luhansk province. Donetsk and Luhansk, which make up the industrial Donbas, are both claimed, along with two southern Ukrainian regions, by Russia.

"Russia continues to initiate frequent small-scale assaults in these areas (of Bakhmut and Svatove), although little territory has changed hands," the British ministry tweeted.

Reuters footage showed fires burning in a large residential building in Bakhmut, while debris littered the streets and most buildings had had their windows blown out.

"Our proposals for the demilitarization and denazification of the territories controlled by the regime, the elimination of threats to Russia's security emanating from there, including our new lands, are well known to the enemy," TASS news agency quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying late on Monday.

"The point is simple: Fulfil them for your own good. Otherwise, the issue will be decided by the Russian army."

In his nightly video message on Monday, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky called the situation along the

frontline in Donbas "difficult and painful".

After suffering a series of defeats in its "special military operation," Russia is now seeking a battlefield victory by capturing Bakhmut, an industrial city.

Gaining control of the city could give Russia a stepping stone to advance on two bigger cities, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk.

Over the past 24 hours, Ukrainian forces have repelled Russian attacks in the areas of two settlements in Luhansk province and six in Donetsk, the General Staff of Ukraine's Armed Forces said yesterday.

It also reported more Russian shelling of Kherson city, in the Zaporizhzhia region and of settlements in the Kharkiv region of northeast Ukraine near the border with Russia.

Zelensky said as a result of attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure nearly nine million people were currently without power - equal to about a quarter of Ukraine's population.

President Vladimir Putin repeated on Sunday that he was open to negotiations but only on Moscow's terms, a stance Kyiv and the West have rejected. Kyiv and Western countries say Russia is engaged in a brutal, imperialist land grab.

RISING CHINA THREAT
Taiwan to extend
conscription to
one year: Tsai

REUTERS, Taipei

Taiwan will extend compulsory military service to one year from four months from 2024 due to the rising threat the democratically governed island faces from its giant neighbour China, President Tsai Ing wen said yesterday.

The move, which had been well-flagged, comes as China ramps up military, diplomatic and economic pressure on Taiwan to assert its sovereignty claims, including almost daily Chinese air force missions near the island over the past three years.

Tsai said Taiwan wanted peace but needed to be able to defend itself. The current military system, including training reservists, is inefficient and insufficient to cope with China's rising military threat, especially if it launched a rapid attack on the island, Tsai added.

Conscripts will undergo more intense training, including shooting exercises, combat instruction used by US forces, and operating more powerful weapons including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and anti-tank missiles, Tsai said.

The de facto US embassy in Taiwan welcomed the announcement on conscription reform.

No fuel price cut

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reducing the price of fuel oil for the time being," he said.

The price of diesel in the global market now is upwards of \$105 per barrel, Azad said.

If the price of each barrel - about 159 litres - comes down to \$103, then BPC would hit break-even.

BPC imports about 63 lakh tonnes of fuel oil. Among various forms of fuel imported, over 70 percent is refined diesel.

"Petrol and octane consumption in the country is only one-tenth the total consumption and that's why we sell the items at a profit margin to reduce the losses," Azad said, while declining to share the profit margin on the two forms of fuel.

Earlier, when the fuel price was hiked by a record 51 percent on average, BPC said they were making a profit of Tk 25 per litre of petrol and octane.

In fiscal 2021-22, which ended on June 30 last year, BPC made a loss of Tk 5,910 crore. Between July last year and January this year, it was in profit. Losses started from February onwards. Between February and November, BPC made a loss of Tk 9,000 crore, Azad said.

The company is still facing a liquidity crisis, he said, adding that at least Tk 20,000 crore is needed to pay the bills for the next two months.

Asked about the government's move to open the fuel market to the private sector, Azad said: "It is up to the government. But we can say that we are on the right track. We have imported fuel as per our plan."

UN urges countries

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Monday's landing in Indonesia was the latest in a series of Rohingya boat landings and rescues around the region in recent weeks, prompting Bangladesh authorities to try and stop people from risking their lives on boats to Southeast Asia.

"We're doing everything possible to stop them from taking the dangerous voyages," Bangladeshi Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Mohammad Mizanur Rahman told Reuters late on Monday.

Criminals snatch shotguns

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leaving," said Selim.

Rashed and Atik informed the higher authorities about the incident, he said, adding that he, along with the two Ansar members, went to the spot and rescued Anwarul and Jafar.

The law enforcers said analysing the CCTV footage, it seemed that the attackers were robbers.

The gang was going to commit robbery at Narsingdi Bazar with firearms and the Ansar members happened to come across them, said a top official of a law enforcement agency.

"So far, it seems that it was not a targeted attack," the official said, requesting anonymity.

Jafar said, "The criminals might have attacked us and taken away the firearms as our paths coincidentally crossed theirs."

Shafiqul Islam, in-charge of

Narsingdi Bazar police outpost, said none of the Ansar members was injured.

Shamsul Arefin, additional superintendent of Narsingdi police, said, "We have already started an investigation to identify and arrest the attackers and we are hopeful the snatched firearms would be recovered soon."

Rab-II is also probing the incident. Ansar member Anwarul told The Daily Star that he and Jafar were asked to go to Narsingdi Sadar Police Station for quizzing.

Meanwhile, a robbery incident occurred at Panchabati Bazar around 3:00am, which is only 3km away from Narsingdi Bazar, where robbers looted firearms from the Ansar members, said additional SP Shamsul.

He added that the law enforcers were looking into whether the same gang was involved in both incidents.

Suranjit's sacked APS

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Md Asaduzzaman, additional commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit, told The Daily Star yesterday that they learnt it after interrogating Omar, who was arrested seven days ago.

Moinul Hasan Shamim and Abu Siddiq Sohel, members of banned militant outfit Ansar Al Islam, were sentenced to death for killing publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan in 2015. Omar is the brother-in-law of Sohel.

Asaduzzaman said that with the help of technology, they came to know that Omar talked to the wives of Shamim and Sohel.

Police then arrested Omar and his wife Tanjila on December 20. Later, a Dhaka court placed Omar on a four-day remand in two phases.

Police claimed that when Omar was in jail in 2012 in a corruption case, he leaned into militancy. After marrying Sohel's sister, he started helping Ansar Al Islam in various

ways. Asaduzzaman said Abu Mohammad Hossain, father of militant Shamim, gave a confessional statement under section 164 before a court about how Omar helped the two militants flee.

In the statement, he said Omar went to Mymensingh and spoke to his daughter Shikha and Shamim's wife Trishna.

On April 9, 2012, Border Guard Bangladesh members detained Omar, then railway general manager Yusuf Ali Mridha and divisional commandant Enamul Huq after a car carrying them entered the BGB headquarters in the capital with Tk 70 lakh.

On August 14 that year, the Anti-Corruption Commission filed a case against Omar, a key figure of the railwaygate scandal, for amassing wealth of Tk 1.43 crore through illegal means and concealing information about wealth worth Tk 50 lakh.

Man killed as he protested

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Melandah municipality yesterday. The victim was Manik Mia, 45, a fish trader.

Quoting locals, Delwar Hossain, officer-in-charge of Melandah Police Station, said Manik's daughter was subjected to verbal abuse by one Abdullah, son of Kashed, in the afternoon.

Hearing the incident, Manik went to Kashed's house immediately. There they were locked into an altercation, said the OC.

At one stage, Kashed hit him with a rod, injuring him critically.

Manik was taken to Melandah Upazila Health Complex where doctors declared him dead, the police officer added.

His two relatives were hospitalised as Kashed and his family members also attacked them during the incident.

Manik's wife filed a murder case against five people with Melandah Police Station.

The OC said they already arrested three accused Kashed, 45, his wife Parveen Begum, 30, and his friend Belayet Hossain, 40, from the spot, but Abdullah went into hiding.

Woman gang raped

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house to get the money, the four put the victim in a car, roamed around different places in the city and raped her.

Later, they got rid of her in Uttara West area, he added.

Sizan and Raihan were arrested last night after a case was filed against them by the victim with Uttara West Police Station, the OC said.

The accused are wanted in several other cases, added the OC.

PM calls for Turkish co-op

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When the premier urged the Turkish government to put pressure on Myanmar to take back its nationals, the outgoing envoy assured her of cooperation.

She expected the next Bangladesh-Turkey Joint Economic Group meeting to be held soon to discuss the enhancement of business and trade between the two countries.

The last meeting of the group was held in Istanbul in 2019.

The PM reviewed the existing and historic ties between the two countries as she sought to strengthen them further, particularly in the economic arena.

Turan said that Turkish businesspeople were interested in making more investments

in Bangladesh because of the opportunities it offered, especially the economic zones.

Two Turkish companies have so far invested \$850 million in economic zones in Bangladesh this year, he added.

Turan said his country was now eager to extend cooperation to Bangladesh's defence sector.

The envoy said his country was also interested to set up a super-specialised hospital in Bangladesh and sought a suitable place for the facility.

He hoped that Sheikh Hasina would be voted to power in the next general election.

Among others, Ambassador at Large M Ziauddin and PM's Principal Secretary M Tofazzel Hossain Miah were present at the meeting.

AL likely to give JP 'walkover'

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part of the AL-led alliance.

The AL took part in the 2008, 2014 and 2018 elections under the 14-party grand alliance formed in 2008. The JP was in that alliance.

According to the Election Commission schedule, by-polls to the six constituencies will be held on February 1 next year.

On December 11, a day after the BNP rally in Dhaka, seven BNP MPs tendered their resignation letter to the Speaker as part of their party's anti-government movement.

The MPs are Zahidur Rahman of Thakurgaon-3, Mosharof Hosen of Bogura-4, GM Siraj of Bogura-6, Aminul Islam of Chapainawabganj-2, Harunur Rashid of Chapainawabganj-3 and Rumeen Farhana, of reserved seats for women.

EC sources said election to the reserved seat will be held once the by-polls to the six constituencies are over.

An AL presidium member told The Daily Star that AL leaders participating in the six by-polls as independents will face no consequence from the party.

The AL will hold a meeting of its parliamentary board within a couple

of days and the final decision will be made there, he added.

Nevertheless, the AL will start selling its nomination forms among aspirants for the by-polls from today. Asked about this, the new presidium member said if the party finally decides not to partake in the by-polls, it will stop selling the nomination forms and return the money to those who bought them.

In Monday's meeting, the AL chief said she wanted the by-polls to be participatory and if the AL did not nominate anyone, the by-polls would be more participatory, said sources. She also said the AL had nothing to lose from the by-polls because those seats were not AL's anyway.

The ruling party has 301 out of the 350 seats in Jatiya Sangsad while the JP has 26 seats.

On December 13, Hasina urged JP leader Raushan Ershad and JP chairman GM Quader to nominate strong candidates in the by-polls.

Contacted, JP Secretary General Mujibul Haque Chunnun said his party has taken the by-polls seriously.

"Around 17 to 18 prospective candidates have collected the nomination papers. We have interviewed some of our leaders," he said.