

4 YEARS OF AL GOVT PM to address nation today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will address the nation today at 7:30pm on the occasion of the Awami League government completing four years in power in its current term.

An official of the press wing of PMO confirmed the development to The Daily Star yesterday.

The state-owned BTV, Bangladesh Betar, and private television channels will broadcast the speech of Hasina, also the president of Awami League.



ATTACK ON COPS Two BNP men sent to jail, 41 granted bail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

A Habiganj court yesterday sent two BNP leaders to jail and granted bail to 41 others in a case filed over a police-BNP clash on November 16 in Sylhet's Lakhai upazila.

Hasanul Islam, district and sessions judge of Habiganj, rejected the bail plea of Lakhai Upazila BNP General Secretary Shamsul Islam and Habiganj District Chhatra Dal President Emran Hossain, and sent them to jail.

Meanwhile, 41 others accused in the case, including Central BNP Cooperative Affairs Secretary GK Gaus, also former mayor of Habiganj municipality, were granted bail.

On November 16, the BNP organised a preparatory meeting at Bamoi Bazar on the occasion of its divisional mass meeting in Sylhet.

According to the case statement, the activists attacked police personnel when they tried to block them. About 50 men, including police officials, were injured in the clash.

Fazle Rabbi, sub-inspector of Lakhai Police Station, filed the case

SEE PAGE 10 COL 6



A delegation of the National Human Rights Commission visiting a vandalised hut of the Mro community in Lama, Bandarban, yesterday. The attackers vandalised 12 wooden huts of the Mro people early Monday.

PHOTO: MONG SING HAI MARMA

UNDER-REPORTING OF COVID DEATHS China stands firm amid WHO, Biden concerns

REUTERS, Beijing/Shanghai

China yesterday defended its handling of its raging Covid-19 outbreak after US President Joe Biden voiced concern and the World Health Organisation (WHO) said Beijing was under-reporting virus deaths.

The WHO's emergencies director, Mike Ryan, said on Wednesday in some of the UN health agency's most critical remarks to date, that Chinese officials were under-representing data on several fronts.

China scrapped its stringent Covid controls last month after protests against them, abandoning a policy that had shielded its 1.4 billion population from the virus for three years.

China's foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a regular press briefing in

Beijing that China had transparently and quickly shared Covid data with the WHO.

Mao said that China's "epidemic situation is controllable" and that it hoped the WHO would "uphold a scientific, objective, and impartial position".

"Facts have proved that China has always, in accordance with the principles of legality, timeliness, openness and transparency, maintained close communication and shared relevant information and data with the WHO in a timely manner," Mao said.

China reported one new Covid death in the mainland for Wednesday, compared with five a day earlier, bringing its official death toll to 5,259.

Ryan said on Wednesday the numbers China was publishing under-represented hospital admissions, intensive care unit

patients and deaths.

Hours later, US President Joe Biden also raised concern about China's handling of a Covid outbreak that is filling hospitals and overwhelming some funeral homes.

"They're very sensitive ... when we suggest they haven't been that forthcoming," Biden told reporters while on a visit to Kentucky.

The French health minister voiced similar fears while German Health Minister Karl Lauterbach voiced concern about a new Covid subvariant linked to growing hospitalisations in the northeastern United States.

The United States is one of more than a dozen countries that have imposed restrictions on travellers from China, while Lauterbach also announced tighter rules for entry to Germany.

Metro network unlikely by 2030

FROM PAGE 1

MRT-6

Approved in December 2012, the 20.10km line from Uttara to Motijheel was supposed to be done by June 2024.

It took six years and three months of physical work to open the 12km Uttara-Agargaon section. The Agargaon-Motijheel section is expected to be opened within this year.

The 1.16km Motijheel-Kamalapur section, which was added in 2020, is expected to open to commuters in December 2025, a year later than the original plan.

The project cost rose to Tk 33,472 crore, about 11,487 crore more than the original estimate.

MRT-1

According to this project's monthly progress report, the work for the country's first underground rail line is to begin in the last week of this month.

But the original plan was to begin physical work of the 31.24km line, the biggest infrastructure project in the transport sector involving Tk 52,561.43 crore, in December 2020. The delay was caused by coronavirus restrictions.

This project's 19.87km part from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport to Kamalapur will be underground. The other part, an 11.36km stretch from Notun Bazar to Purbachal, will be elevated. There will be 19 stations for the two parts.

The construction work will start with developing land for a depot at Pitalganj, Narayanganj. A Japan-Bangladesh joint venture company has been hired for building the depot.

Contracts for only one, out of 12 packages, have been signed so far.

Transport expert Prof Moazzem Hossain said, "I don't think [MRT Line-1] will be complete by 2026. It usually takes five to seven years to build an MRT line."

If the authorities want to meet the 2026 deadline, they will have only four years to do it, he added.

A document from Japan International Cooperation Agency, which will provide 70 percent of the cost in soft loans, shows the line is expected to be opened in 2028.

MRT-5 (NORTHERN)

The line, from Savar's Hemayetpur to Bhatara via Gabtoli, Mirpur, and Gulshan, is to be built at an estimated

cost of Tk 41,239 crore.

MAN Siddique, managing director of DMTCL, on December 28 announced that physical work would start in July this year. But not even the drawing of its detailed design has been done.

The deadline for the 20km line with 14 stations is 2028.

As per its progress report, 71.14 percent work for the detailed design was done as of December 2022.

Tender for development of depot area is being evaluated while preparation for floating tender for the other packages is underway, documents show.

The physical work will start with the land development for a depot in Hemayetpur, said an official, adding that he was hopeful of meeting the 2028 deadline.

About this, Prof Moazzem said, "I will be happy if they can complete this by 2030."

A document of Jica, which will provide 70 percent of the cost in soft loans, said the line is expected to be opened in 2029.

MRT-5 (SOUTHERN ROUTE)

The 17.40km line from Gabtoli to Dasherbandi via Shyamoli, Russel Square, Karwan Bazar, Hatirjheel and Aftabnagar will have both underground and elevated sections.

It will have 15 stations and would cost an estimated Tk 53,000 crore. The deadline for the project is 2030.

Feasibility study was done in November 2022 and the authorities are now preparing a Development Project Proposal (DPP) for the project, documents show.

But no financier has been found yet.

MRT-2

The project faced a major setback last year after the authorities changed the way it would be financed and implemented.

It was supposed to be implemented under the Government-to-Government (G2G) PPP (Public Private Partnership) model with Japan.

But the metro authorities now want to implement it under a government initiative because they found the conditions given by Japan unacceptable.

The authorities changed the preliminary alignment of the line. The line was supposed to be 24km from Gabtoli to Chattogram Road via Mohammadpur, Nilkhet, Azimpur, Central Shaheed Minar, Gulistan, Motijheel, Kamalapur, Mugda, and Demra.

But, as per the new alignment, the line would be extended up to Narayanganj. And it would have an extended part from Gulistan to Sadarghat.

Physical work for the line was slated to start in 2024 but the finance-related changes are likely to cause more delays.

"If we can't do those [feasibility studies and other work] in two years, we will be able to do them in three... In that case, we will have to work faster to complete the work by 2030," Siddique told this correspondent in October 2022.

The authority is now searching for a financier for the feasibility study.

MRT-4

As per the preliminary plan, the line is supposed to be from Kamalapur to Narayanganj underground.

But metro rail authorities changed the plan as Bangladesh Railway is expanding lines from Dhaka to Narayanganj.

Its new alignment would be from Dhaka to Madanpur in Narayanganj via Signboard and the authorities are looking for funds for a feasibility study.

Prof Moazzem said the government may not build this line now. "Because, in that case, they will have to take huge loans. They also have to pay subsidies for its operation."

Two years after US Capitol attack, police still seeking 350 suspects

AFP, Washington

Two years after the violent attack on the US Capitol by supporters of president Donald Trump, justice officials have arrested 950 suspects but are seeking some 350 more, the Justice Department said Wednesday.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is also still trying to find out who planted two pipe bombs at political party offices near Congress on the eve of January 6, 2021.

Authorities increased their reward for information on those behind the pipe bombs to \$500,000 from \$100,000, saying the bombs were "viable" and could have killed someone if they had exploded.

"Our work is far from over," said Attorney General Merrick Garland in a statement two days before the anniversary.

We're crossing a critical juncture

FROM PAGE 1

The president further said, "We are now crossing a critical juncture in our national life. The year 2022 was full of challenges for us. The whole world passed a difficult time."

"Although we tackled the pandemic quite successfully and maintained the dynamism of our economy, the war between Russia and Ukraine has slowed down this progress."

The government is constantly striving to attune the law enforcement agencies to the needs of the time in order to establish good governance, he said.

"In order to face the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution, the government has taken different initiatives, including preparation of master plans, laws, policies and strategies with the goal of transforming 'Digital Bangladesh' into 'Smart Bangladesh'."

He said the government is formulating laws, rules and policies for maintaining the trend of information

flow and creativity.

Highlighting the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the president said her robust leadership in extending humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya refugees, women empowerment, and tackling the challenges of climate change has been acclaimed globally.

Hamid also highlighted the government's development activities and progresses in different sectors.

Immediately after the House sat earlier, the Speaker nominated a five-member panel to chair the 21st session.

The panel members are Ramesh Chandra Sen, AKM Shajahan Kamal, Yusuf Abdullah Harun, Kazi Firoz Rashid and Salma Chowdhury.

They will chair the parliament session, according to seniority, in the absence of the Speaker and deputy speaker.

The 21st session of the current parliament will continue until February 9.

On January 10, a special discussion

will be held on the Homecoming Day of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The decisions came at a meeting of the Business Advisory Committee of parliament.

Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury presided over the meeting, where it was also decided that a special session will be held in April to observe the Golden Jubilee of Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad.

President Hamid will address the session and a general discussion will be held on the thanksgiving motion in his speech.

In another development, the Speaker informed the House about the resignation of the seven BNP lawmakers.

They are Harunur Rashid from Chapainawabganj-3, Abdus Sattar Bhuiyan from Brahmanbaria-2, Gulam Mohammad Siraj from Bogura-6, Zahidur Rahman from Thakurgaon-3, Mosharof Hosen from Bogura-4, Aminul Islam from Chapainawabganj-2 and reserved seat MP Rumeen Farhana.

Govt keeps borrowing heavily from BB

FROM PAGE 1

borrowing will not create inflationary pressure immediately "but there is a strong possibility of inflationary pressure in the days to come if the government continued borrowing from Bangladesh Bank".

Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office, said the government should be cautious on borrowing from the central bank as it might create inflationary pressure ahead.

"Non-food inflation is still high. So, we should think about it," he said.

Mansur said, "We should explore the reasons behind the high government borrowing from the central bank."

He reckons scamsters laundering money has forced the central bank to finance the government by printing money.

Some influential business groups have laundered money by taking out billions of taka from commercial banks in the name of loans, violating banking rules, he said.

This recently created a shortage of greenbacks at commercial banks, forcing them to buy a large amount of dollars from Bangladesh Bank.

If the banks had enough liquidity, the government could have avoided borrowing heavily from BB, he said.

In addition, policymakers' failure to make time-befitting decisions helped money launderers, he said.

For instance, if the BB had depreciated the taka eight to 10

months ago, money laundering could have been controlled to some extent, Mansur said.

The exchange rate of the taka now stands around Tk 107 for a dollar, which was Tk 85.80 a year ago.

If the current exchange rate was in place in January last year, money launderers would have had to pay more to buy dollars, he said.

"The higher price of the dollar could have discouraged the launderers. Adjusting the exchange rate in line with demand usually plays a great role in containing money laundering."

In November last year, Bangladesh Bank said it had identified cases of money laundering during a special audit.

Some entities inflated prices of their imported goods between 20 percent and 200 percent through a trick called over-invoicing, said GM Abul Kalam Azad, then spokesperson for Bangladesh Bank.

Over-invoicing is when importers here get suppliers abroad to submit a bill that exceeds the value of the shipped goods to launder money abroad.

Washington-based Global Financial Integrity (GFI) in December 2021 said Bangladesh lost \$8.27 billion every year on average between 2009 and 2018 due to mis-invoicing of values of imported and exported goods, which the traders indulged in to evade taxes and to illegally move money across borders.

During those years, Bangladesh lost an average 17.3 percent taxes and duties.

Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank, said that it was difficult for banks to finance the government as the banks were in a liquid crisis.

The government set a borrowing target of Tk 1,06,334 crore from the banking sources for this fiscal.

Of the money the government took from BB in the last six months, Tk 17,582 crore was used to repay commercial banks. So, the government's net borrowing from the banking system is Tk 27,475 crore as of December 28.

A BB official said borrowing from banking sources is a budgetary programme of the government but there should be a balance between commercial banks and BB while borrowing.

Rickshaw-puller

FROM PAGE 1

injured, Sumon Hossain, 28, and Roky Hossain, 26, and sent them to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital in critical condition.

"We are investigating the incident and trying to arrest those responsible," OC Arbinda said, adding that Mamun's family will file a case in this regard after completing his burial.

Anwar Hossain could not be contacted for comments.