

Ecneec to finally meet after 2 months

Expensive projects likely to be tabled

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Following a nearly two-month hiatus, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec) will meet on Tuesday.

According to Ecneec, 11 project proposals worth roughly Tk 10,710 crore will be placed at the meeting.

On November 22 of last year, Ecneec held its last meeting.

After the Covid-induced economic crisis, Bangladesh faced economic pressure due to the Russia-Ukraine war, forcing the government to take austerity measures at the beginning of the current fiscal year.

The finance ministry issued a circular in this regard and categorised projects to reduce government expenditures.

Under the new directive, the government halted low-priority projects and also directed ministries against undertaking new ones.

Of the 11 projects that will be proposed at Tuesday's meeting, five are revised and six are new.

Among the new projects, the government has plans to undertake a 15.31km elevated road construction and a 13.4km road widening in haor region of Kishoreganj to establish the district's direct road links with Dhaka, Sylhet, and other districts at a cost of Tk 5,651 crore.

Another new project the "Multipurpose Hydraulic Elevator Dam Building" on Srimai River in Chattogram's Patia worth Tk 133 crore will also be proposed.

Also, the government is planning to undertake a Tk 676 crore project to tackle river erosion in Barishal.

The remaining three new projects will cost around Tk 2,779 crore and will be implemented with foreign funding in line with the austerity measures.

On the other hand, the five revised projects, which will also be placed at Tuesday's meeting, will see a Tk 3,744 crore rise in cost.

Some of these projects will have been revised three times.



Ukrainian Border Guards are seen at their positions near the border with Belarus, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Volyn region, Ukraine, on Friday. Belarus may enter the Ukrainian conflict if Kyiv decides to "invade" either Belarus or Russia, a Russian foreign ministry official has said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UK to send heavy tanks to Ukraine

Russia warns move will only intensify conflict; missiles hit key infrastructure in Kyiv, Kharkiv

AGENCIES

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak yesterday pledged to provide Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine, making it the first Western country to supply the heavy tanks Kyiv has been calling for.

The pledge saw a swift reaction from Russia which warned it would only "intensify" the conflict.

"Bringing tanks to the conflict zone, far from drawing the hostilities to a close, will only serve to intensify combat operations, generating more casualties, including among the civilian population", the Russian embassy in the UK said.

Sunak said the tanks were a sign of the UK's "ambition to intensify our support to Ukraine", according to a readout of a phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Ukraine's European allies have sent Kyiv more than 300 modernised Soviet tanks since Russia invaded in February 2022.

But they have so far held off on dispatching the Western-made heavy tanks that Ukraine has repeatedly requested to push forward against Russian invaders.

Zelensky thanked the UK on Twitter for making decisions that "will not only strengthen us on the battlefield, but also send the right signal to other partners".

Ukraine's forces have taken heavy losses in the battles of Soledar and Bakhmut in recent months and have called on the country's allies to give it more support.

Russia said on Friday its forces had wrested control of the war-scarred town of Soledar in east Ukraine, its first claim of victory in months of battlefield setbacks, although Ukraine said fierce fighting was still under way.

"To win this war, we need more military equipment, heavy equipment," Andriy Yermak, head of Ukraine's presidential office, said.

Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba also

said that he had spoken with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and "emphasised the need" for Ukraine to receive Western-type tanks.

Sunak's formal offer follows reports that he was preparing to sign off on sending four British Army Challenger 2 main battle tanks to eastern Europe immediately, with eight more to follow shortly afterwards.

The prime minister's office has not yet confirmed the exact number of tanks it will send to Kyiv.

A Downing Street spokesman said Sunak and Zelensky agreed on the "need to seize on this moment" after Ukrainian victories had "pushed Russian troops back".

The UK announcement comes ahead of next week's meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, which coordinates arms supplies to Kyiv, at Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

Germany has been especially hesitant of supplying heavy tanks.

Three frontrunners as Czechs vote for new president

AFP, Prague

Polling stations yesterday reopened for day two of Czech presidential polls with a billionaire, a general and an academic leading in the first of a likely two-round vote seen as too close to call.

The winner will replace Milos Zeman, an outspoken and divisive political veteran, following a period marked by the country's 2022 EU presidency as the war in Ukraine raged.

The victor will face record inflation in the central European country of 10.5 million people, as well as bulging public finance deficits related to the war in Ukraine.

Polling stations will close at 2:00 pm (1300 GMT) on Saturday, with first-round results expected later in the day.

Unless a candidate wins more than 50 percent outright – which is considered unlikely – the two top-placed contenders will go head-to-head in a second round on January 27-28.

"If you asked me to place a bet (on the result), I wouldn't," Metropolitan University Prague political scientist Petr Just told AFP.

Populist ex-prime minister Andrej Babis, retired general Petr Pavel and university professor Danuse Nerudova are vying to become only the fourth president since the Czech Republic was founded in 1993 following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

First phase

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Mofazzel Hossain Khan, 70, son of Mobark Hossain of Dumuria in Khulna, Akkas Ali Shikdar, 50, son of Adil Uddin Shikdar of Munshiganj, Abdur Razzak, 70, son of Abdul Rashid of Chattogram, and Habibur Rahman Hobi, 70, son of Rahmatullah of Narsingdi.

Of them, Nurul Haque and Abu Taiab died on Thursday from old age and respiratory problems while Habibur Rahman, Mofazzel and Akkas passed away on Friday and Razzak and Habibur died yesterday morning from old age.

The second phase of the Ijtema is scheduled to be held on January 20-22 at the same venue.

Ijtema is being held in two phases since 2012 to address the accommodation issue.

AL 'clears the way' for ex-BNP leader

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Contacted, Moin said the tenure of the current parliament would expire within only about a year. "If I am elected a lawmaker, I will have very little time for taking up development works in my constituency. Thus, I will not be able to meet the voters' expectations.

"Considering the circumstances, I have decided not to contest in the by-polls. I have withdrawn my candidacy around 11:00am today [yesterday]," he told The Daily Star.

Mahbubul said, "If I win the by-election, I will be a lawmaker only for about a year. Furthermore, I'm not well. That's why I have decided to quit the race."

Another candidate Shajahan Alam claimed that he was not under pressure from any quarters to

withdraw. "I myself have decided not to take part in the by-polls."

Except Sattar, four other candidates are now in the race, according to sources at the Returning Officer's office. They are Jatiya Party's Abdul Hamid Bhasani, Zaker Party's Jahirul Islam Juel, and two independents – JP rebel Ziaul Haque Mridha and local BNP leader Abu Asif.

On December 10 last year, the BNP at its Dhaka divisional rally in the capital's Golapbagh announced that seven of its lawmakers, including Sattar, would resign from parliament.

Subsequently, the MPs submitted their resignations to Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury. Among the seven are Rumeen Farhana, a lawmaker from a reserved seat for women.

US official Lu arrives, meets Momen over dinner

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landed around 8:00pm, is scheduled to hold formal meetings with the foreign minister, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, Law Minister Anisul Haq and Adviser to the Prime Minister on Private Industry and Investment Salman F Rahman today.

He is also expected to meet civil society groups in the evening. He will leave Dhaka tomorrow morning.

Earlier yesterday, Momen said Dhaka will request Washington to withdraw the sanctions on Rab and its seven current and former officials.

"Rab is now much more mature. We will request the US to reconsider the sanctions," Momen told reporters after attending a discussion at Dhaka University.

"We will raise our issues and they will bring up theirs. But others [foreigners] don't need to teach us democracy. Democracy, human rights and justice are rooted in each of our heart," said the foreign minister.

Lu's visit comes less than a week after the four-day Dhaka tour of US National Security Council Senior Director for South Asia Rear Admiral Eileen Laubacher. This signifies the US' eagerness to boost cooperation in defence, maritime security, and economic relationship.

Bangladesh has strong ties with the US, but it saw some strains because of the sanctions imposed on Rab in December 2021 and also not inviting Dhaka to Biden's democracy summit. The human rights situation in Bangladesh has improved in terms

of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances since the sanction, rights bodies said.

Foreign ministry officials said the Rab achieved many successes, especially in combating violent extremism and militancy, an issue that is also a priority for the US.

"That's why it is important to equip the law enforcement agency. The US can provide latest technologies to help combat militancy," an official said.

Foreign policy analysts said Donald Lu is likely to raise the issue of fair and participatory elections that the US officials have been talking about repeatedly in recent months, especially because it has questions about the last two parliamentary elections.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam recently told reporters that political parties involved in militancy or having extreme ideologies should in no way get any support from the US or its allies.

A foreign ministry official said Bangladesh will present its own positions before the US and express how it is trying to improve human rights, labour and press freedom situation.

"Since Rana Plaza, Bangladesh has made significant progress in labour reforms. This was also recognised by the international community. If there are more, we will continue to work and improve on this front," he told The Daily Star.

Bangladesh will ask the US to reinstate the GSP facility suspended

The Parliament Secretariat later issued a gazette notification declaring the seven seats vacant.

On December 18, the Election Commission announced the schedule for the by-polls to six constituencies.

Sattar on December 29 submitted his resignation letter, citing personal reasons, to the BNP chief's Gulshan office.

The former MP on January 1 collected nomination form to contest the by-polls as an independent candidate. Hours later, he was removed from all posts of the BNP for "violating party decisions and engaging in anti-party activities".

Sattar, a former adviser to BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, was elected MP five times from different constituencies in Brahmanbaria and Cumilla with BNP tickets.

after the Rana Plaza collapse, and seek support in climate funding, infrastructure and renewable energy, said officials.

The US, which wants Bangladesh to be on its side in the Indo-Pacific, will advance the agenda with Dhaka.

Foreign Minister Momen said Dhaka was still studying the pros and cons of joining the US Indo-Pacific Strategy.

US tightens rules on converting pistols to long guns

AFP, Washington

US authorities announced Friday they were tightening rules on a relatively new gun threat that has become more notable in recent years: converting pistols into more lethal short-barreled rifles.

The new regulations target the use of attachable shoulder mounts or braces on guns classified as pistols, which are regulated differently from long guns and the separate category of short-barreled rifles, or those with barrels under 16 inches (40.6 centimeters).

Millions of readily convertible "handguns" have been sold in recent years, frequently semi-automatic weapons that, once equipped with a removable shoulder brace and other attachments, are indistinguishable in function from long guns but for their shorter barrels.

Launch staffer killed during brawl with another employee

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

A man was killed in a clash between staffers of a launch in Patuakhali yesterday.

Abdur Razzak, 62, cabin in-charge of MV Sundarban-14, was attacked and killed around 5:00pm, said Moniruzzaman, officer-in-charge of Patuakhali Police Station.

Following a heated argument, Razzak was punched in the face that knocked him out.

He was rushed to Patuakhali Medical College Hospital where the doctors declared him dead.

Police detained Moshir Rahman, a clerk, and Yunus Mia, the supervisor, for questioning.

Other workers declined to comment on the matter.

No case was filed till the filing of this report at 9:10pm.

Man sent to jail for vandalising Liberation War memorial

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

A Patuakhali court yesterday sent a man to jail for vandalising a sculpture in Patuakhali's Dumki upazila.

Shariatullah, 20, purposefully damaged the tip of a Liberation War memorial sculpture at Joy Bangla Chattar of Dumki Upazila Complex around 10:30pm on Friday.

He was held by security guards who handed him over to the police next morning, said Abdus Salam, officer-in-charge of Dumki Police Station.

Following the incident, Syed Golam Mortoza, a former commander of Upazila Muktiyoddha Sangsad, filed a case against him with police.

'World's most durable DJ' dies aged 98 in Hong Kong

AFP, Hong Kong

A beloved Hong Kong radio host dubbed the "world's most durable DJ" by Guinness World Records has died aged 98 after more than seven decades on the air.

Reinaldo Maria Cordeiro, known to fans as "Uncle Ray", was hailed as an industry powerhouse who jump-started the careers of numerous local musicians and introduced pop trends to generations of Hong Kong fans on his long-running radio shows.

Almost all accused kept hanging

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The researchers learned of the professions of around half of those accused.

Politicians and journalists ranked the highest and were neck-to-neck in terms of those accused – at least 287 politicians and 280 journalists.

According to the data, politicians – ruling party affiliates to be more specific – were also the largest group of people prosecuting the journalists.

The cases were mostly on charges of defamation, the data shows.

However, the prosecutors were not direct victims in any of those cases, meaning they were filing those on behalf of someone else who was "hurt" by the alleged act of defamation.

Out of all the cases, as many as 140 were filed directly for allegedly defaming Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the report said, while 64 cases were filed for allegedly defaming ministers.

"Ruling party activists have filed 4.21 cases every month, and each had

an average of 2.4 persons accused; or in simple words, every week a case has been filed by an Awami League activist against more than two persons for almost four years under one law," Riaz said in the report.

Even among the ruling party affiliates, Bangladesh Awami League and Bangladesh Chhatra League topped the list of accusers, filing 74 and 72 cases each respectively.

"In recent years, with growing access to the internet, social media, particularly the use of Facebook, has grown exponentially. It has also become an avenue for expressing discontent against social ills and government policies.

"It is in the context that the DSA has been used as an instrument to silence contrarian voices," concluded the report.

Launching the report, Zillur Rahman, executive director of CGS, told a webinar that the culture of fear that has pervaded the country for the last few years was only solidified by a law like the Digital Security Act.

A 'perfect' Bangladesh downs Aussies

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suffered a double blow, courtesy of Bangladesh skipper Disha Biswas who sent back both the openers inside the Powerplay.

Claire Moore and middle-order batter Ella Hayward steadied the ship with a 76-run stand.

Moore hit seven boundaries to score 52 off 51 deliveries before falling to leg-spinner Rabeya Khan in the 17th over. Bangladesh pacer Marufa Akter sent back Lucy Hamilton and Hayward for two and 35 in the following over to leave the Australians at 102-5 with two overs remaining.

But the Aussies went hard in the final two overs, plundering 28 runs to post a competitive total.

For Bangladesh, Marufa and Disha scalped two wickets each and Rabeya picked up one.

Bangladesh's chase got off to the worst possible start as opener Misty Shaha was dismissed in the very first ball of the innings – bowled by seamer Rhys McKenna.

But Afia Prattasha and Dilara Akter put together an assured 66-run stand to bring Bangladesh back into the game. However, Australia pacer Chloe Ainsworth sent back the duo in the 11th over, leaving Bangladesh with 59 to get off 54

balls with seven wickets in hand. Afia scored a 22-ball 24, while Dilara hit seven fours during a 42-ball 40 that eventually earned her the player of the match award.

"We are a very good side. We are a perfect side from both batting and bowling perspectives. We just try to perform as per our roles and that brings us the result," Dilara said after the game.

Shorna Akter and Sumaiya Akter did not let the departures of Afia and Dilara be the trigger to a collapse as they starred in an unbeaten 61-run stand to motor Bangladesh across the finish line with ease.

Shorna smashed a massive six over mid-wicket during her 18-ball 23 before tucking one down the leg side to hit the winning runs, while Sumaiya's steady 31-run knock off 25 balls proved ample support.

Bangladesh will take on Sri Lanka on Monday before facing the USA on Wednesday in their final two Group A games at the same venue. And according to skipper Disha, the young Tigrisses will be taking one game at a time and will not let the win over Australia overwhelm them.

"We are happy, but not much as we want to improve more in the coming days," Disha said.