EU releases €23m for Rohingyas in Bangladesh

The fund will be used to meet humanitarian needs of the refugees, host communities

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The European Union (EU) has released over €23 million to address the humanitarian needs of Rohingya refugees and their host communities in Bangladesh.

A further dedicated allocation of €2 million will help address the needs of Rohingya and other refugees in neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, according to an EU media statement released on Wednesday.

The EU will continue to support the efforts of Bangladesh in responding to the Rohingya refugee crisis by providing the fund, part of which will also contribute to implementing disaster preparedness programmes in the country, reads the statement.

EU support for Rohingya refugees, their host communities, and disaster preparedness efforts in Bangladesh since the beginning of the Rohingya crisis in 2017 now stands at over €242 million, it says.

The statement also says the EU has released over €18 million to address the humanitarian needs of the people of Myanmar.

"Myanmar has seen a dramatic increase in humanitarian needs since the military takeover. Meanwhile, the situation of Rohingya refugees requires continued life-saving assistance in Bangladesh and neighbouring countries," said EU Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič.

In Myanmar, 17.6 million people are expected to be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023, a dramatic increase from one million in 2021. A third of those in need are children.

EU humanitarian aid for Myanmar now totals over €68 million since 2021.

EU has been providing humanitarian aid to people in Myanmar since 1994, and in Bangladesh since 2002, according to the statement.

Mexico keen to bolster ties with Bangladesh

Its envoy Federico Salas tells The Daily Star; the Latin American country set to open embassy in Dhaka

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Mexico is set to open an embassy in Dhaka this year as the Latin American nation is eager to boost trade and diplomatic relationship in consideration of Bangladesh's growing economy and importance in regional and global spheres.

Mexico currently has a consulate in Dhaka.

Federico Salas, Mexican Ambassador to Bangladesh, was in Dhaka to present his credentials to President Abdul Hamid. He agreed to an exclusive interview with The Daily Star on January 30 where he shared his insights on bilateral relations between the two nations and future plans.

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"We are taking tangible and specific decisions. We decided to open a resident embassy in Bangladesh in the course of this year. With this, opportunities will multiply and in turn deepen our relationship," said Salas.

Noting that cultural and people-to-people contact play an important role in improving relations, Salas said, adding that he wanted to bring Mexican chefs and have week-long culinary experiences here in Bangladesh.

"Mexican food is part of world heritage. We want to bring here-- the taste, the colours and the spirit."

Salas also said he will start working on academic exchange in higher education to improve

people-to-people ties.

Salas, who is based in Delhi and accredited to Bangladesh, Nepal, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, also met Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen and visited the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI) during his trip.

"Mexico-Bangladesh relationship is still focused on multilateral sphere, mostly in UN, but bilateral relationship is growing. In the past five years, two-way trade multiplied by 100 percent to about $500 million, which has created a momentum. I want to pursue this to keep up the growth trend and diversify goods and services. There is a significant potential there," said Salas.

With that in mind, Mexico's Minister for Interior and Exterior Relations Marcelo Ebrard will be visiting Bangladesh on March 7-8, which will be the first visit to Bangladesh by a Mexican foreign minister to explore future cooperation.

Currently, Mexico exports cotton to Bangladesh and imports textile from the nation but is eager to diversify to include pharmaceutical products and information technology products, the envoy added.

Mexico has a wide range of products including tanned or crust hides and skins of bovines, fisheries such as shrimp, dehydrated fruits, textiles and auto parts, and can link up trade with Bangladesh in that line.

Referring to his meeting with FBCCI, Federico said Mexico has free trade agreements with some of the world's largest countries including US, Canada, members of European Union and a number of Latin American countries.

Therefore, he said, investing in Mexico by Bangladeshi companies can be very beneficial. Similarly, Mexican companies can also explore ways of investment in Bangladesh. He also said Mexico would like business delegations from both countries to visit each other to help the growth of commercial relations.

In 2021, a Bangladeshi military delegation attended the celebrations of Mexico's 200 years of independence and a Mexican military delegation also attended the celebrations of Bangladesh's golden jubilee of independence.

Salas said Mexico is looking at the possibility of gaining experience from Bangladesh in terms of UN peacekeeping.

On the multilateral front, the diplomat said, Mexico and Bangladesh collaborated in the areas of promoting migrant rights, and can further work through G20 to channel the voices of the global south.

"I am hoping that during the foreign minister level meeting of the G20 in Delhi this March, delegations of our two countries can sit down and get to understand each other's points of views. As a G20 member, we can also represent those concerns to the rest of the members."

Woman killed in train accident

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, *Ctg*

A woman was killed after a train hit her in Chattogram's Mirsarai upazila yesterday.

The identity of the victim could not be known immediately, said police.

The victim is around 55 years old. She might have been hit by Dhaka-bound Chattala Express or Maimansingh-bound Bijoy Express, said Khorshed Alam, sub-inspector of Railway Police's Sitakunda Camp.

The victim was walking on the rail track when she was hit by the train. She died on the spot, he said quoting witnesses.

On information, police recovered the body, he further said.

Man lands in jail over rape

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Moulvibazar*

A Habiganj court has sent a man to jail in connection with a case filed over the rape of a schoolgirl in the district Sadar.

The victim's father filed a case against Ahad Mia, 50, an Arabic teacher at a local maktab (Islamic school), with Habiganj Police Station on Thursday.

According to the case statement, Ahad raped the victim on Wednesday when she went to the maktab to learn Arabic.

He was arrested and produced before a court on Thursday, said Golam Mortuza, officer-in-charge of Habiganj Police Station.

Student found dead in classroom

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Khulna*

Police recovered the body of a teenage boy from a classroom at his school in Khulna's Dumuria early yesterday.

The victim is Nirob Mondol, a student of Gutudia ACGB Secondary School, said Sheikh Koni Mia, officer-in-charge of Dumuria Police Station.

Six children, aged between 12 and 15 years, were also taken to the police station for questioning, the OC added.

Mustafa Sarwar, former president of the school, said Nirob's father received phone calls from two unknown dialers around 4:00pm yesterday.

"They demanded Tk 30 lakh in ransom," he added.

Police were informed about it immediately and a general diary was also filed.

$6b more to come from dev partners

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including Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, according to the IMF's staff report.

The IMF, the WB and the ADB would be collaborating extensively to help Bangladesh build its climate resilience, a key objective of the programme.

Being one of the world's most vulnerable nations to climate change, Bangladesh has set its course toward achieving climate-resilient development by envisioning various strategies and policies, including a Delta Plan and a series of five-year plans, said Bangladesh Bank Governor Abdur Rouf Talukder and Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal in their letter of intent to the IMF.

"These plans as well as our National Adaptation Plan, recently approved by the cabinet, have identified our country's adaptation and mitigation priorities in the transportation, power, industry, infrastructure, and agriculture sectors, estimating the additional annual climate financing needs at 2–3 percent of GDP," they added.

An automated pricing formula for petroleum products, which is scheduled to kick in next fiscal year, is one of the 11 conditions of the IMF's newly-formed Resilience and Sustainability Facility that helps low- and middle-income countries vulnerable to climate change address the challenges.

"This is a high urgency," said the IMF staff report.

Bangladesh is the first Asian country to access funds from RSF. Of the $4.7 billion that the country is getting from the IMF, $1.4 billion is coming from RSF.

"To further enhance climate mitigation, Bangladesh has ramped up its reform efforts toward transparent market-based pricing of fossil fuels," the IMF staff report said.

Going forward, the authorities plan to regularly adjust petroleum product prices via a formula-based pricing mechanism and thereby lock in zero structural subsidies for petroleum products.

"These actions are expected to help ease budget pressures for energy subsidies and encourage more efficient fuel consumption going forward."

In addition, barring further global price shocks, the government has committed to not increase these subsidies during the programme and explore options to gradually reduce them further, while scaling up social protection schemes.

The government has also committed to adopting a sustainable public procurement policy paper and an associated action plan to integrate climate and green dimensions by September as part of the reforms under RSF. The IMF has marked this as a top reform priority.

By the end of this year, the central bank will adopt guidelines for banks and financial institutions on reporting and disclosure of climate-related risks in line with the recommendations of the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures.

In fiscal 2024-25, the government will adopt a national disaster risk financing strategy while integrating social assistance measures. This reform was agreed upon following a discussion with the WB.

Next fiscal year, the finance ministry will adopt and implement a methodology for embedding climate change in the medium-term macroeconomic framework, by analysing macro-fiscal risks from climate change and publishing it in the Medium-Term Macroeconomic Policy Statement.

This reform agenda is synced with the WB and the ADB's prospective financing conditions.

By December next year, BB will conduct and publish climate stress testing for the overall financial system and update the guidelines on stress testing for banks and financial institutions to include climate change considerations. This is another high-urgency reform agenda of the programme.

By June 2025, the government would adopt an updated PPP policy and framework that integrates climate-related risks and develop relevant guidelines.

"This has been discussed with the WB and the ADB for synergies," the IMF staff report added.

No licence, no bike

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The ministry would now finalise the guideline, Rabbani, also the BRTA director responsible for road safety, told The Daily Star.

A sharp and unregulated growth of vehicles, especially motorcycles and three-wheelers, over the last few years has resulted in a spike in the numbers of crashes and casualties.

A total of 55.92 lakh vehicles were registered with the BRTA till December last year. Of them, 40.07 lakh (71.67 percent of the total) are bikes, according to the BRTA.

Besides, many motorcycles are not registered.

At least 7,713 people were killed in 6,829 crashes last year. Bikes were involved in 2,973 of the accidents that left 3,091 people dead, according to data from the Road Safety Foundation.

The figures were 43.53 percent and 40.07 percent of the total crashes and deaths occurred that year, the foundation said this month.

An investigation by a government committee into road accidents during last year's Eid-ul-Fitr holidays found a sharp rise in bike crashes and recommended banning motorcycles on national highways that don't have service lanes.

A proposal on banning motorcycles on highways was placed before the road safety council on November 15 last year. But the council, led by Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader, directed the authorities concerned to prepare a guideline instead.

As per section 32 of the Road Transport Act-2018, the government can control any type of vehicle and the guideline is going to be enacted following this section, reads the draft.

The purpose of the guideline is to curb road accidents through controlling bikes, introducing relatively less accident-prone motorcycles, creating awareness among bikers and helping bring discipline and ensure road safety, it added.

The draft guideline recommended implementing the control in four stages -- at the production or import level, at sale, at registration or changing ownership, and during operations of motorcycles.

Scooty-type bikes are less accident-prone than the sporty-type ones, that aremore common in Bangladesh. So, production of scooty-type bikes should be increased and the vehicle should be popularised, the draft said, adding if necessary, special duty benefits should be offered to scooty-type bikes, and duties on sporty-type motorcycles should be increased.

Bike dealers, agents of motorcycle producers or importers will not allow anyoneto buy a bike without having a driving licence and theyhave to complete registration before handing over the vehicle to the buyer, says the draft.

It also stipulates that bikes cannot be sold or registered with the BRTA if the buyer does not have a national identity card. Applicants for motorcycle registration must be aged above 18 and must have education up to class-VIII and equivalent classes.

Bike producers, assemblers and importers must have a road safety wing and they will provide at least two day's mandatory training on road safety to buyers before handing over bikes, the draft says.

Bikers providing ride-sharing service have to wear a specific dress, it adds.

Contacted, Hafizur Rahman Khan, president of Motorcycle Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said he is not aware of any such guideline.

He said the number of road crashes must be curbed and to ensure it, the relevant laws, especially those regarding controlling speeding, have to be enforced properly.

"Controlling only a particular type of transport will not yield any positive results in this regard. You have to control speeding of all vehicles," he told this correspondent last week.

Yousub Ali Mollah, additional secretary of Road Transport and Highways Division, said upon receiving the draft, his division has formed a committee, led by Anisur Rahman, a joint secretary of the division, to scrutinise the draft.

Once they get the opinion from the committee, they would hold inter-ministerial and stakeholders' meetings and upload the draft guideline on their website seeking public opinion before finalising the guideline, he told this newspaper.

2 in 3 patients die without treatment

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Talukder, executive director at the Centre for Cancer Epidemiology, Prevention and Research, Bangladesh.

To remedy the situation, in 2019, the authorities approved plans to build 100-bed cancer hospitals in each of the eight divisional headquarters.

While this is a positive step, experts suggested the government prioritise improving existing cancer treatment facilities.

"It is a step in the right direction, given the number of cancer patients who are denied treatment. But ensuring proper service and efficiency of the existing hospitals is more urgent," Dr Habibullah, former professor at NICRH told The Daily Star yesterday.

"The scarcity of cancer specialists is also a major concern. The total number of cancer specialists in the country will not exceed 300. Therefore, it is impossible to treat every cancer patient," he added.

The NICRH, a 500-bed hospital, has staffers, including a hundred specialists, to serve only 150 patients at a time and this is a major reason behind the long lines of cancer patients at hospitals, he also added.

Contacted, Dr MA Sabur, adjunct faculty at the health economic institute of Dhaka University, highlighted the need for undertaking a programme to meet the shortage of cancer specialists in the country.

The three most common cancer treatments are surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy.

"Hospitals do not have medical experts for all three types of treatments. In fact, the same physician who provides chemotherapy often also does radiotherapy, while, general surgeons perform surgery on cancer patients.

"We have to fill this gap," he said.

While the total number of cancer patients in the country is unknown, it is estimated that there were around 157,000 new cancer patients in the country in 2020.

Of them, 109,000 patients died, according to GLOBOCAN 2020, which provides global cancer statistics and estimates of incidence and mortality in 185 countries.

The statistics seem to hold up, given that there are only 1,000 beds in all of the country's 10 state-run cancer treatment facilities, half of which are at the NICRH.

Of these facilities, NICRH, BSMMU, and Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) are located in the capital.

The rest are being operated as cancer units by seven medical college hospitals across the divisional cities of Chattogram, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Bogura, Sylhet, Barishal, and Khulna.

The cancer unit at Mymensingh Medical College Hospital however is currently not in operation.

What is even more shocking, is the fact that all of the aforesaid hospitals combined have only 17 radiotherapy machines, with only six of them currently in working condition.

Of the dysfunctional radiotherapy machines, five are at the NICRH, two at the DMCH, and one each in the medical college hospitals in Chattogram, Mymensingh, Bogura and Rangpur.

Because of the higher treatment costs, very few cancer patients can afford treatment at the eight private facilities in the country.

Speaking on the issue, Sheikh Daud Adnan, deputy director (hospitals and clinics) at the DGHS, said, "Reinstalling radiotherapy machines requires a lengthy procedure and appointing new manpower is not easy. So a gap has been created in recent years."

AL, BNP gear up for show of strength

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2:00pm while the AL's Dhaka City (south) unit will hold its rally on the premises of Kamrangirchar Hospital to denounce "BNP's terror and anarchy" around 3:00pm.

Chattogram city BNP will hold its divisional rally in the Kazir Dewri area. AL's "peace rally" will be held at Anderkilla intersection, which is around 2km away from Kazir Dewri.

"It is unexpected that the Awami League will hold a rally on the same day at the same time as us. They will be responsible if any untoward incident happens," Chattogram City BNP President Shahadat Hossain told The Daily Star.

However, Chattogram City AL Vice-President Khorshed Alam Sujon said the venue for the AL rally is nowhere near the BNP's venue and there was no way to see it as an instigation.

In Sylhet, the city AL will hold a rally around 3:00pm, an hour after the BNP event.

The BNP earlier fixed the Registrar's Office premises as the venue. But the AL on Wednesday announced that it would hold the "peace rally" at the same place.

A day later, the AL changed the venue to Sylhet Central Shaheed Minar.

Sylhet BNP President Abdul Quiyum Choudhury said the AL did this to "disrupt our peaceful rally".

Professor Zakir Hossain, general secretary of the Sylhet City AL, said, "Our peace rally is to remind the people that the BNP has taken a destructive path to create an impediment to development."

In Khulna, the BNP will hold a rally on the city's KD Ghosh Road area around 2:00pm while the AL's event will be held at Shibabari intersection.

Khulna City BNP Convenor Shafiqul Alam Mona, said, "BNP's Khulna rally on October 22 was peaceful. But the Awami League prevented people from joining it. A BNP activist was also killed in an attack... Since most of the BNP men are likely to attend the rally commuting through the Awami League venue, our activists are in fear of attacks."

Khulna City AL Office Secretary Munshi Mahbub Alam Sohag said apart from some isolated incidents, no clash between the AL and the BNP has ever taken place in Khulna.

In Rangpur, the BNP will hold its event at the Grand Hotel intersection while the AL will hold a rally on the Public Library premises.

Mymensingh City AL will hold its rally on the Gymnasium premises around 11:00am while the BNP's event will be held at Mymensingh Polytechnic Institute ground around 2:00pm.

[Our Chattogram, Sylhet, Rangpur, Khulna, and Mymensingh correspondents contributed to this report.]