

Belgium queen commends Bangladesh’s progress

Calls on Hasina

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said her government is making all-out efforts to implement the agendas of the Sustainable Development Goals in the country.

The PM said this when the visiting Queen of Belgium, Mathilde Marie Christine, paid a courtesy call on her at her office yesterday.

Christine lauded the progress of Bangladesh, attained under the leadership of Hasina, in different sectors.

PM’s Speechwriter Md Nazrul Islam briefed reporters after the meeting.

The targets of the 2030 global agenda, SDGs, were aligned in the country’s current 8th five-year plan and the perspective plan 2021-2041, the PM told Christine, one of the UN SDG advocates for 2021-2023.

At the meeting, different other issues, including the Russia-Ukraine war, displaced Rohingyas, women empowerment, girl education, health, social safety net, disaster management and climate change, also came up for discussion.

Hasina said the Russia-Ukraine war created instability and high inflation throughout the world. “The people are suffering. This should immediately be stopped.”

The queen of Belgium appreciated the development of women and children particularly in education. She also said she was very happy to see the progress of Bangladesh.

Hasina informed the queen about her government’s steps for women empowerment in various sectors, including politics, defence, the judiciary and other fields.

She said women and children are mainly getting primary healthcare

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina welcomes Queen of Belgium Mathilde Marie Christine to her office in the capital yesterday. The queen, also a UN SDG advocate, paid a courtesy call on the PM on the last day of her three-day visit to Bangladesh.

PHOTO: PID

SCHOOLCHILDREN ACROSS THE GLOBE

One in 3 lacks access to drinking water: UN

AFP, Paris

One in three children worldwide does not have access to clean drinking water while at school, impacting their health and ability to learn, the United Nations said yesterday.

“Globally, almost one in three schools has no drinking water from an improved source,” the UN cultural agency Unesco said in a new report.

“One in three schools worldwide has no basic sanitation,” meaning a toilet and sewage system, the agency found,

while “almost half of schools do not have handwashing facilities with water and soap”.

Clean drinking water and handwashing facilities are key to protecting children against the likes of Covid-19, parasites, respiratory illnesses and diarrhea, said school health and nutrition expert Emilie Sidaner, who oversaw the report.

Schools without clean drinking water cannot prepare meals for students, contributing to child malnutrition, she told AFP.

Lack of running water and soap is also

a major challenge for girls who “cannot go to school during their period”, she added.

For example, one in four girls did not go to school in Bhutan during that time of the month, Sidaner said.

And one in five had to skip classes during menstruation in Ivory Coast, while one in seven missed school for the same reason in Burkina Faso.

“There needs to be more investment in water and sanitation as well as all other infrastructure that enables quality learning,” Sidaner said.

No scope

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seat in one of the by-polls. A BNP lawmaker who had resigned from parliament also got reelected as an independent candidate.

“These have proved that fair elections were held under the Awami League rule,” she said while participating in the discussion on the thanksgiving motion on the president’s speech in parliament.

Apart from the by-polls, the PM said the Rangpur mayoral election was also held in a free and fair manner.

“No one raised any complaints about the Rangpur mayoral election. Jatiya Party won that election defeating Awami League,” she said.

“I hope, after these [by-elections and mayoral election], no one will get a chance to raise any question about elections under the Awami League.”

In her speech, the premier said the government has built the Padma Bridge with its own funding, which was challenging. “This one decision has changed the image of Bangladesh internationally.”

She further said digital services were being spread to every corner of the country. People now can get access to land documents from home, while any bill can be paid online.

Thanking President Abdul Hamid for delivering speech in the first session of parliament this year, the PM said this was probably his last speech. “Because, according to our constitution, no one can become president for more than two consecutive terms.”

He has performed his duties successfully and efficiently as a “very lively president”, she said.

Hamid, who started his political life when he was a student, was also successful as Speaker and deputy speaker of the House, added the PM.

‘LNG TO BE IMPORTED FROM SPOT MARKET’

Responding to a question from JP MP Fakhrul Imam, Hasina said the government has taken measures to import LNG from the spot market to meet the demand for gas in power generation during the current agricultural irrigation season and the coming Ramadan and summer season.

The PM’s answers to lawmakers’ queries were placed on the table during yesterday’s parliament sitting, with Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury in the chair.

The premier said the government has to import LNG from the spot market at a high price to meet the increased demand for gas, to keep production in the industrial sector uninterrupted, and to continue the production of captive power by different export-oriented factories.

“That’s why the government has decided to increase the price of gas used only in power, industry, captive power and commercial sectors, keeping the gas price for other consumer groups unchanged,” she said.

In response to another question from AL MP Kazim Uddin Ahmed, Hasina said the unprecedented success in increasing agricultural production in Bangladesh and attaining food self-sufficiency during the tenure of the AL government has attracted the attention of the world.

Record subsidy allocation not enough

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Some Tk 16,000 crore has been given to subsidise fertilisers. But that fell way short of the requirement: another Tk 40,247 crore is needed.

The budget has a Tk 5,965 crore allocation for food subsidy, but there is a request for a further Tk 4,000 crore.

Similarly, Tk 11,300 crore has been given to run open-market sales by the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh, but another Tk 9,000 crore is needed.

The finance ministry is now scoping out the actual requirement for subsidies from the ministries as the prices of fuel, gas, fertilisers and commodities have stabilised in the global market and there have been gas and electricity price hikes in January.

“BPC is now making a profit on petroleum prices, but they have some subsidy arrears -- they have requested that sum. But, we will not release it,” said another finance ministry official.

The letter of intent to the IMF suggests as much.

Effective steps are being taken to contain the budget pressures stemming from exceptionally high global energy prices, it said.

“As a result, we do not expect to provide budget support to BPC.”

Although budget subsidies for natural gas and electricity are expected to rise significantly in fiscal 2022-23, they should remain relatively contained at 0.9 percent of GDP.

However, increased subsidies to the order of 0.7 percent of GDP will be required for fertiliser and food this fiscal year amid large increases in import prices, the letter said.

“Going forward, we plan to eliminate all structural subsidies for petroleum products and, to this end, will move to a periodic formula-based price adjustment mechanism by the end of 2023. Furthermore, we will aim at adjusting electricity prices further to reduce subsidies,” it added.

In January, the electricity price was hiked twice by 5 percent each time and Nasrul Hamid, the state minister for power, energy and mineral resources, monthly incremental tariff hikes are to be expected from now on.

In the same month, the retail price of gas price was increased by 14.5 percent to 178.9 percent for industries, power plants and commercial establishments, who together account for 78 percent of gas use in Bangladesh.

The finance ministry officials said the subsidy for gas and electricity will be increased by Tk 17,000 crore. So in the revised budget, a total of Tk 40,000 crore will be allocated for the two overheads.

But from next fiscal year, subsidy for the two would be gradually pared back, they said.

For food and fertiliser, another Tk 8,000 crore will be made available.

Zahid Hussain, a former lead

economist of the World Bank’s Dhaka office, called for a reassessment of the government’s subsidy plan.

“We have to be clear about who we subsidise,” he said.

The government’s impending switch to an automated fuel pricing mechanism is a good plan.

“But it will have an impact on the lower income people. What is the government doing for them? This needs to be addressed simultaneously. The additional financial burden amid the high inflation is not possible for them to bear.”

Similarly, he called for the reassessment of fertiliser subsidy.

“If the intention of fertiliser subsidy is to attain national food security, then the general subsidy can never be lifted. If we want to subsidise just the poor and the marginal farmers and not the well-off ones, then subsidy needs to be targeted.”

He went on to suggest a card system to channel fertiliser subsidies to poor farmers.

Hussain also questioned the rationale for subsidising urea fertiliser, which is harmful to the environment.

Not just that, given the low prices, the other sectors benefit from the low prices of urea.

“Is it justifiable to subsidise all fertiliser? Fertiliser subsidy should be equitable and environmentally friendly.”

HSC pass rate falls

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He added that the success rate varies from one board to another because of the question patterns.

Cumilla scored the best with a 90.72 percent pass rate, while Dinajpur was at the bottom with 79.08 percent.

“I heard that questions for English and higher maths in Mymensingh were more difficult. That’s why fewer students did well in these subjects,” Kamal said.

Dinajpur Education Board Chairman Prof Kamrul Islam said the students enrolled in colleges during the pandemic in 2020 and they had to attend online classes.

“Many students in my board did not have devices to attend the online classes. This can be the reason behind the decline,” Kamrul said.

Students of his boards performed poorly in English this year and that brought down the pass rate, he added.

Data from the education boards shows that 85 percent of the students passed in English in Dinajpur, 82 percent in Mymensingh, 95 in Cumilla, and 92 percent in Dhaka.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, more girls have passed

the HSC exams since 2010 when the total pass rate was 71.72 percent, and for girls, it was 71.88.		
COMBINED RESULTS		
Counting the Alim exams and HSC vocational tests, the combined pass		
YEAR	PASS RATE	GIRLS PASS RATE%
2018	64.55	68.18
2019	71.85	74.84
2020	100*	100*
2021	95.57	96.67
2022	84.31	86.34
*No exams held due to Covid-19; results prepared on the basis of JSC, SSC results		

rate was 85.96 percent in 2022, down from 2021’s 95.26 percent.

In 2022, about 93 percent of 90,266 alim examinees and 94.41 percent of 1.11 lakh vocational candidates came out successful.

A total of 9,423 madrasa students and 7,104 vocational students got GPA-5.

Ninety-seven percent of the 224 students who took the exams at eight foreign centres passed the exams.

Poritosh gets 5 years in jail

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or destroys communal harmony”. Sessions Judge of the Rangpur Cyber Tribunal Abdul Mojib handed the verdict.

The verdict against Poritosh is also the first instance where the Rangpur Cyber Tribunal handed down a conviction, that too, against someone whose own cowshed was burnt down in the mayhem.

In addition to being the only one related to the communal violence being punished, Poritosh was put into solitary confinement for eight months while he underwent trial.

The prison authorities had told Poritosh’s lawyer and his family that he was being kept there “for his safety”. Solitary confinement that lasts longer than 15 consecutive days is recognised by the United Nations as “torture”.

Poritosh was denied bail three times by the Rangpur Cyber Tribunal. He was finally released on bail on May 9, 2022, after a High Court order was issued in this regard.

But on February 5, Judge Abdul Mojib sent him to jail again to await the verdict.

At the moment, not only is Poritosh the only one convicted, but also the only one behind bars.

The others accused for the

communal violence include the village mosque’s moazzem Rabiul Islam, who made the calls for people to gather; Saikat Mandal, the mastermind of the incident; and Ujjal Hasan, who had first taken a screenshot of the social media post allegedly made by Poritosh and spread it. They are all out on bail.

Also out on bail are 74 people accused of attacking and burning down the village, while 72 others are on the run.

“We will take the case to the High Court,” said Poritosh’s lawyer Shamim al Mamun.

Ismail Hossain, a sub-inspector of Pirganj Police Station, filed a case under the DSA accusing Paritosh Sarkar and he was taken into custody on October 19.

Bangladesh

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A special flight, C-130J aircraft of the Bangladesh Air Force, will operate on the Dhaka-Ankara-Dhaka route to carry the post-earthquake emergency relief and medical supplies to Turkey.

Meanwhile, the government has declared one day of state mourning for today marking the deaths in the earthquake in Turkey and Syria.

The Cabinet Division issued a gazette notification in this regard yesterday.