

Bangladeshi aid reaches quake-hit Syria

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The humanitarian aid package sent under the directive of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have been handed over to the International Committee of Red Cross for the earthquake-affected people in Syria.

The Bangladesh Air Force flight carrying dry food, medicines, blankets, tents, and winter clothes reached Damascus yesterday.

There, Nahida Sobhan, the Bangladesh ambassador to Syria, and Moutaz Douaji, deputy minister of local administration and environment of Syria, received the aid.

The foreign ministry coordinated the relief effort in collaboration with the Armed Forces Division, Bangladesh Air Force, and the disaster management and relief ministry.

Earlier, President Md Abdul Hamid, the PM and Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen conveyed profound condolences to their Syrian counterparts on behalf of the government and the people of Bangladesh.

Bolsonaro says he plans to return to Brazil in coming weeks

AFP, Washington

Former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro said late Saturday that he plans to return to Brazil "in the coming weeks" after arriving in the United States in December.

"I too want to return to Brazil. I intend to return to Brazil in the coming weeks," the right-wing ex-leader said during a meeting with Brazilian supporters in Boca Raton, Florida, according to a video broadcast by CNN Brasil.

Bolsonaro traveled to the United States in late December, several days before supporters stormed government buildings in Brasilia in an attempt to overturn the election victory of his rival, leftist Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina congratulating Shahabuddin with a bouquet following his nomination as the president of Bangladesh. Her younger sister Sheikh Rehana and the central leaders of Awami League were also present at the Gono Bhaban at the time.

PHOTO: PID

Turkey, Syria quake death toll nears 30,000

UN says the world has so far failed the people of Syria

AFP, Kahramanmaraş

The UN yesterday denounced a failure to get desperately needed aid to war-torn regions of Syria, while warning that the death toll of nearly 30,000 from an earthquake that also devastated Turkey could at least double.

A UN convoy with supplies for northwest Syria arrived via Turkey, but the agency's relief chief Martin Griffiths said much more was needed for millions whose homes were destroyed.

"We have so far failed the people in northwest Syria. They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn't arrived," Griffiths said on Twitter.

"My duty and our obligation are to

correct this failure as fast as we can."

Aid has been slow to arrive in Syria, where years of conflict have ravaged the healthcare system, and parts of the country remain under the control of rebels battling the government of President Bashar al-Assad, which is under Western sanctions.

The UN convoy of ten trucks crossed into northwest Syria via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, according to an AFP correspondent, carrying shelter kits including plastic sheeting, ropes and screws and nails, as well as blankets, mattresses and carpets.

Tens of thousands of rescue workers continued to scour flattened neighbourhoods in freezing weather that has deepened the misery of millions now in desperate need of aid.

But security concerns prompted the suspension of some operations, and dozens of people have been arrested for looting or trying to defraud victims in the aftermath of the quake in Turkey, according to state media.

Miraculous tales of survival still emerged, though experts caution that hopes for finding people alive in the devastation dim with each passing day.

A seven-month-old baby named Hamza was rescued in southern Hatay province more than 140 hours after the quake, while Esmat Sultan, 13, was also saved in Gaziantep, state media reported.

At the Vatican, Pope Francis called for "concrete support" for the quake victims, urging people to "think what we can do to help them."

Shahabuddin next president

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and bridges minister, then disclosed to the media that AL President and AL Parliamentary Party Chairman Sheikh Hasina had picked Shahabuddin as the presidential candidate.

The parliamentary party on February 7 gave Hasina the sole power to finalise the nomination.

In the run-up to the nomination submission, names of many Awami League leaders, several former chief justices and bureaucrats came into discussion.

"It was beyond our imagination that Shahabuddin would be chosen," said a top AL leader.

Shahabuddin, who was in the AL delegation, said he had no immediate reaction. "Everything was done in line with Almighty Allah's will," he said.

The presence of a presidential candidate at the EC during submission of nomination is rare, according to EC officials.

Quader proposed the name on the papers, which was seconded by Information Minister Hasan Mahmud, a lawmaker from Chattogram 7, they said.

Meanwhile, greetings poured in for Shahabuddin from people of all walks of life, including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself.

Nicknamed Chuppu, Shahabuddin is also the vice chairman of Islami Bank Bangladesh board of directors.

He was appointed a director of the bank in May 2017 after Chattogram-based S Alam group took over the lender in January that year. He is also legal retainer of NRB Global Bank Limited.

The presidential election is scheduled for February 19, and 343 MPs have been enlisted as voters to elect the head of the state.

The post is mostly ceremonial as he or she is to act as per the advice of the prime minister, except when appointing the premier and the chief justice, but it takes on some significance during the polls. The president has a say in issuing directives to help the Election Commission function effectively.

With the 12th general election slated for January next year, top AL leaders believe someone trustworthy should be holding the president's office during that crucial period.

Incumbent President Abdul Hamid's tenure will expire on April 24.

According to Article 123 of the constitution, the presidential election must be held 60 to 90 days before the expiry of each five-year term.

As per the constitution, Abdul Hamid cannot become president again as he was elected for two terms.

SHAHABUDDIN'S PROFILE

Born in Pabna in 1949, Shahabuddin is a lawyer by profession and a member of the Advisory Council of Awami League, Obaidul Quader said.

He completed a master of science at Rajshahi University in 1974 before obtaining an LLB degree from the same institution in 1975.

In 1971, he was the convener of the Pabna chapter of Swadhin Bangla Chhatra Sangram Parishad, an alliance of students seeking independence.

Shahabuddin was imprisoned for several years following the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975.

He was later appointed the law ministry's coordinator for the Bangabandhu assassination case.

In 1982, Shahabuddin joined BCS (judicial), and in 1995, he was elected general secretary of the Judicial Service Association.

He worked as a District and Sessions Judge and retired in 2006. He also served as the chairman of a labour court and lawyer of the Supreme Court after his retirement.

Shahabuddin acted as the chairman of Judicial Enquiry Commission to investigate offences like murder, rapes, looting and arson that followed the 2001 elections. The commission was formed following a court order in 2009.

As an ACC commissioner from March 2011 to March 2016, he was vocal against World Bank's allegations of corruption in the process of building the Padma Bridge, after the global lender backtracked on its \$1.2 billion deal for the project.

The allegations were later found untrue by a Canadian court.

In December 2012, an ACC enquiry team did not find any material evidence against former communications minister Syed Abul Hossain in this connection.

In the National Council of Awami League in December last year, he served as election commissioner. He also worked as a journalist of Daily Banglar Bani from 1980 to 1982.

His wife Prof Rebecca Sultana is a former joint secretary of the government. They have a son.

Information Minister Hasan Mahmud while talking to reporters at the Secretariat said the party has nominated an extraordinary person for the president post.

Shahabuddin played an important role in dealing with false allegations of corruption in connection with the Padma Bridge project.

He was under too much pressure while serving as the ACC commissioner but stood firm, added the minister.

Opening likely before polls

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Replying to a question, he said they have sent proposals for creating posts on the new routes. "If the manpower can't be recruited before the inauguration, we will operate trains with the existing manpower," he added.

CTG-COX'S BAZAR RAIL LINE

With funding from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the government took up the 128km metre-gauge rail line project in 2010, with a target completion date of June 2013. It was supposed to cost Tk 1,852.35 crore.

But in 2014, the government decided to install dual-gauge lines and keep space for double lines, which raised the cost to a staggering Tk 18,034.47 crore.

The authorities then made more changes. They shelved the plan to build the lines up to Gundum in Ramu, near the Myanmar border.

After the project's first revision in April 2016, its deadline was set to June 2022. But physical work from Dohazari of Chattogram to Ramu started in March 2018. The current deadline is June 2024 with a one-year defect liability period.

BR plans to run trains from Dhaka to Cox's Bazar and the line is also a part of the Trans-Asia Railway network.

"We are hopeful that the line will be opened by October this year. Although some of the work will remain unfinished, it will not create any problems for train operations," Project Director Mofizur Rahman told The Daily Star yesterday.

The project saw 78 percent progress until December.

BR sources said work on the

automated signalling system at some stations may not be done by October.

A proposal for creating 1,289 new jobs for running trains on the route is pending with the public works ministry.

KHULNA-MONGLA RAIL LINE
BR in December 2010 took up the project to link Mongla Port and Khulna and the deadline for the India-funded project was December 2013.

The physical work began around six years after the project was approved, driving up the cost to Tk 4,260.88 crore from Tk 1,721.39 crore.

The current deadline expired in December last year. The project authorities in August sought time until July 2024.

Once the 64.75 km broad-gauge line is opened, Mongla Port will be directly connected to the capital via rail.

About 96.50 percent progress was made as of December last year.

"Our work will be done within June and the line can be opened anytime afterwards," Project Director Md Arifuzzaman told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said they were strengthening six bridges and installing the signalling system, all of which should be done by June.

He said their proposal for manpower was under process.

PADMA BRIDGE RAIL LINK

BR in May 2016 undertook the project to build a 169 km rail line from Dhaka to Jashore via the Padma Bridge for Tk 34,702.74 crore. Its deadline was June 2022.

The China-funded project was later revised. The cost rose to Tk

39,247 crore and the deadline was extended to June 2024.

Once opened, the distance from Dhaka to Jashore would decrease by 200km and the travel time would halve -- five hours.

"We will be ready by August to run trains from Dhaka to Bhanga [in Faridpur]. Before that, we will have a trial in July," Project Director Afzal Hossain told this correspondent yesterday.

He said they would be able to install the automated signalling system at four out of eight stations. The four stations would be functional at the beginning.

He added that their proposal for creating 1,674 posts for operating trains on the route was pending with the public works ministry.

AKHAURA-LAKSAM DOUBLE LINE
BR in December 2014 took up the project to upgrade the 72km Akhaura-Laksam section.

The Tk 6504.54 crore project funded by ADB was supposed to be completed by June 2020 but the latest deadline is this June.

At least 39km of the 72km section is in service now and the rest will be ready by June, Project Director Md Shuboktagin told this newspaper yesterday.

He said they would make special arrangements for operating trains on the section even though construction of a bridge would not be finished by then.

The upgrade is supposed to make rail communication between Dhaka and Chattogram smoother and faster.

This correspondent tried to call the railways minister last night but could not reach him.

Rohingya woman gets life for peddling drug

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A Chattogram court yesterday sentenced a Rohingya woman to life imprisonment in a drug case filed in 2018.

The convict, who is currently absconding, was also fined Tk 10,000, in default of which she has to serve another month in prison. Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge Shariful Islam passed the verdict after finding Mosammat Nur Taj, 28, wife of Idris of Balukhali Rohingya camp in Ukhiya, guilty of drug possession.

According to the case statement, Nur and a minor were detained from a passenger bus in Bakalia area of the port city by the Department of Narcotics Control on December 28, 2018. They found 6,000 yaba pills in Nur's possession, and another 4,000 were recovered from the minor.

The trial of the minor is running under a juvenile court in Chattogram.

Woman's decomposing body found

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

Police yesterday morning found the decomposing body of a woman in her house in Faridpur town's West Khabashpur.

Jhuma Akhter, 35, lived with her mother Monowara Begum, 55, and sister Shuma Akhter, 27, said MA Jalil, officer-in-charge of Faridpur Sadar Police Station.

"Locals informed us after getting foul smell from the house. However, when we arrived, Jhuma's mother and sister tried to stop us from entering her room."

Her body, presumably seven days old, was found under her bed," he added.

Police detained Monowara and Shuma for quizzing. The body was sent to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical College Hospital for an autopsy.

Suspected jihadists kill 10 Niger soldiers: ministry

AFP, Niamey, Niger

At least ten soldiers died in an ambush by a group of "armed terrorists" in southwestern Niger, close to the Mali border, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The toll from Friday's attack could rise as 16 people are still missing and 13 soldiers were wounded, a ministry statement said.

The troops were on patrol in the north of Banibangu department when they "came under a complex ambush by a group of armed terrorists" it said, referring to jihadist groups.

The statement also said several attackers were killed during the fighting, but did not specify how many.

BNP to march

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of action for the next one year. These are not counter-programmes. We will hold different type of events..."

However, many have pointed out that the event where Quader spoke was held to counter BNP's road march.

In Khilgaon, Quader said BNP's fall is imminent. "They want a neutral caretaker government. Except for a lunatic or a child, nobody is neutral in this country."

The BNP has now resorted to arson, he told the rally organised by Dhaka South AL.

Only the AL ensures women's empowerment and freedom, he said, adding that girls will not be allowed to move freely if the BNP Jamaat comes to power.

Dhaka North Jubo League also organised a rally in Farmgate yesterday morning in protest of "BNP's terror and anarchy".

At a press conference at BNP chairperson's Gulshan office, Mosharraf said the ruling AL is announcing counter programmes to create chaos.

On February 18, all BNP units and like-minded parties in the cities will march, and in Dhaka, two city units of BNP will organise separate marches, he said.

After the announcement, Mosharraf along with thousands of leaders and activists of Dhaka North BNP marched towards Bosila from Shyamoli.

The BNP earlier organised processions in the capital on January 28, 31, 30, and February 1. The party's road marches in all unions across the country was held on Saturday amid incidents of clashes that left at least 200 injured.

AL allies welcome the nomination

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He worked in the judiciary and Anti-Corruption Commission, took part in the Liberation War, and was also involved in student politics.

"His nomination as president is well-judged and proper as he has commitment towards the country and its people," Hanif said.

Amir Khashru Mahmud Chowdhury, a member of BNP Standing Committee, said, "We have no interest in the president as the present government has no relation with the people."

"This is an unelected parliament and illegal government. They are making prime ministers, ministers

and MPs as per their wish. And in continuation of the process, they have now made someone president. No interest in the process was seen from the people..." he told The Daily Star.

The Jatiya Party, main opposition in parliament and also a partner in the ruling AL-led 14-party combine, welcomed the nomination and hoped that the next president will lead the country neutrally in line with the constitution and will treat everyone neutrally irrespective of their political affiliations and identities.

JP Chairman GM Quader told this newspaper, "He [Shahabuddin] is a like-minded person. I hope that he will be able to discharge his duties

with success."

Quader, also deputy leader of the opposition in parliament, said, "I hope he will treat everyone equally irrespective of identity and post. I hope we will get cooperation from the new president and he will stand by us in our need."

In his reaction, Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon said, "I hope he [Shahabuddin] will uphold the dignity and honour of the president post and will discharge his duties impartially and in line with the constitution. We wish him good luck."

Ruhin Hossain Prince, general secretary of Communist Party of

Bangladesh, said as per the political tradition in the country, a partisan person becomes the president.

"So, we don't expect that he will play any effective role during a political crisis going beyond party interest."

"Although Shahabuddin was a judge, he acted as an Awami League man for a long time in various capacities after his retirement.

Saiful Huq, general secretary of Revolutionary Workers Party of Bangladesh, responded by saying that the AL failed to pick an experienced, acceptable and seasoned politician for the president post.