

Erosion of democracy to limit US cooperation

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have had about the treatment of certain advocates in civil society, particularly in human rights, concerns about previous elections," he said.

He added, "The US will continue to voice those concerns in the months to come. But sure, we have confidence and we have heard from the government today their commitment to hold a free and fair election. And we'll hold into that."

During his courtesy call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Gono Bhaban yesterday, the premier said, "The next election will be fair and free. I fought for democracy throughout my life."

She reiterated that the Election Commission is completely independent.

Prime Minister's speechwriter Md Nazrul Islam briefed reporters afterwards.

Hasina said if the people vote for the Awami League in the next general election, her party will govern the country.

"I never want to come to power through vote-rigging," she said, adding that she always struggled for the people's rights to food and vote.

She said the first-ever EC reconstitution law was passed in parliament and then a neutral EC was constituted based on the law.

The PM said that apart from the Awami League, no other political party in the country had any base at the grassroots. The BNP and the Jatiya Party were born in the cantonment.

Hasina said the transformation of Bangladesh has become visible over the last 14 years of her government.

The Russia-Ukraine war and the Rohingya issues also came up for discussion during her meeting with Chollet.

She said the world should stop this war as it has caused high inflation and commodity prices throughout the globe.

Mentioning that the US is the most powerful country, she said it can take steps to stop the war. The disputes can be settled through negotiations, she said.

About the Rohingyas, the premier said they have become a burden on Bangladesh and some of them are getting involved in criminal activities like drug and human trafficking,

militancy, and infightings.

She asked the international community to assist the initiative in Bhashanchar and try their best for quick and amicable repatriation of the Rohingyas.

Chollet said the US would try their best for the repatriation of the displaced people but added that the repatriation will be possible when a democratic government assumes power in Myanmar again.

PM's Private Industry and Investment Adviser Salman F Rahman, PM's Principal Secretary M Tofazzel Hossain Miah, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, and US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas were present.

Chollet's tour comes high on the heels of a series of visits by high-profile US officials in recent months.

The US is Bangladesh's biggest foreign direct investor, and donor for the Rohingya crisis. It wants Bangladesh on its side under its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Dhaka's relations with Washington saw some strains following the sanctions on Rab and some of its officials and for not inviting Bangladesh to Biden's Summit for Democracy in 2021.

Dhaka is eager to have the sanctions withdrawn. It also wants more support for the Rohingya crisis, climate change adaptation, and reinstatement of the GSP facilities that were suspended after Rana Plaza collapse in 2013.

Asked when will the sanctions on the Rab be lifted, Chollet, at the meeting with senior journalists, said it was good that there has been a decline in extrajudicial killings over the last one year.

"Nevertheless, in order to really turn the page on this issue, we are going to need to see sustained reforms as well as accountability [of the Rab]," he said.

"Quite frankly, I don't think we're there yet on these fronts ... We are committed to continuing to help Bangladesh strengthen the rule of law and security. But until we see accountability, until we see sustained reforms, we are not going to be able to turn the page on that."

Asked why Bangladesh was not invited to the second summit for democracy, scheduled for March 29-30, Chollet said after the first summit

for democracy, the US asked all the countries to come up with a plan of action for the coming year.

"Many of them came up with their own plan of action, but Bangladesh chose not to ... That's its decision to make. We're looking forward to, perhaps in the future, them [Bangladesh] coming up with their own plan of action to be able to contribute to this important effort," he said.

Chollet said part of the reason why he came to Bangladesh is to send the message that the US will continue to support Bangladesh on the Rohingya issue despite many challenges around the world.

While the US continues to work for improving conditions in Myanmar, it will also work with Bangladesh to ease the sufferings of the people inside the camps.

US Ambassador Peter Haas, The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam, Samakal acting editor Muzammil Husain, The Daily Ittefaq Editor Tasnima Hossain, The Business Standard Editor Inam Ahmed, AFP Bureau Chief Shafiqul Alam, Jamuna TV CEO Fahim Ahmed, and Channel 24 Executive Director Talat Mahmud were present at the event.

Chollet left Dhaka last night.

Invest more in Bangladesh

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as part of the celebration of 50 years of the diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and South Korea.

The envoy said that his country is keen to strengthen the bilateral ties with Bangladesh further in the next 50 years.

The relationship will grow gradually from strength to strength in the days to come, said the Presidential Envoy and Senior Secretary for Future Strategy in the Office of the President of Republic of Korea.

Diplomatic relations were established 50 years ago as South Korea recognised Bangladesh on May 12, 1972.

During the meeting, the South Korean presidential envoy shared his personal experiences regarding his visit to Bangabandhu Memorial Museum yesterday morning.

At least \$4.45b needed to cover fuel costs

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He hoped that there will no interruption in the fuel supply chain during the summer months.

Whether the government would be able to make the funds available to import the fuel necessary for power generation remains to be seen as the pressure on foreign currency reserves that saw acute loadshedding between August and November last year – is yet to subside.

As of February 8, foreign currency reserves stood at \$32.6 billion, down 28.1 percent from a year earlier – and enough to cover four months' import bills, according to data from the Bangladesh Bank.

"In such a situation, it will not be possible to spend \$4.45 billion for fuel import – PDB's estimation needs revision," said Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

There were talks of the government increasing the local gas supply and setting up solar systems in schools and for irrigation as alternate options.

"Then why will they need the huge amount of money to import fuel?"

The government is trying to control imports in different sectors to preserve dollars. "PDB's plan is contradictory to the government's initiatives," Moazzem added.

PDB's plan to ensure 16,000MW electricity a day is appreciable as it

would go some way towards bringing down loadshedding and people's sufferings, said Mohammad Tamim, professor of petroleum and mineral resources engineering at BUET.

"But from where they would be able to manage the dollars? It will be challenging," he added.

The ongoing dollar crisis is PDB's concern too.

And to meet the additional demand amid the narrow fiscal space, PDB is aiming to get the most out of the gas-fired power plants as those are the cheapest electricity generators.

In fiscal 2021-22 fiscal year, the cost per kilowatt-hour of electricity by gas-fired power plants was Tk 3.46. In contrast, it was Tk 9.17 for coal-fired plants, Tk 22.10 for furnace oil-based plants and Tk 154.11 for diesel-fired plants.

Of the 23,482 megawatts of electricity production capacity, gas-fired power plants account for 47.8 percent, furnace oil 25.2 percent, coal-fired plants 11.1 percent and diesel-run plants 5.5 percent.

Subsequently, PDB has asked Petrobangla to provide 1,200 million cubic feet (mmcf) of gas a day.

Recently, in a letter to the finance division, Petrobangla wrote that they will need around \$1.75 billion in five months to meet the demand for liquefied natural gas through spot purchases and long-term contracts.

The state-owned agency plans to

import 10-12 cargo LNG from the spot market by June. Another 24 cargo is expected under long-term agreements with Qatar and Oman, said a Petrobangla official requesting anonymity.

This will require \$1.75 billion, he said.

"Additional money will be needed as we have a liquidity crisis now. PDB said they will need additional gas but we have not got our dues from the company. Bangladesh Bank also doesn't cooperate with us," he added.

In another letter to the finance division, PDB sought \$750 million to import coal for the local coal-fired power plants including Payra and Rampal power plants.

Individual power producers told The Daily Star that they would require \$1.15 billion to import furnace oil and diesel to produce electricity as per PDB's demand.

The Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation will need \$2.225 billion to import fuel, 10 percent of which will be needed for power generation.

Power Cell Director General Mohammad Hossain is hopeful of a better summer this year.

"Most of the coal-fired power plants are now in operation. Though the coal price hiked abnormally in the international market, we are trying to get it as coal is cheaper than furnace oil and diesel," he added.

US MASS SHOOTING

Biden demands Congress act on gun violence

AFP, Washington

US President Joe Biden called on Congress Tuesday to act against America's epidemic of gun violence, one day after a new massacre on a Michigan university campus killed three people and injured five.

As the leader of a nation plagued by daily shootings, Biden said he had promised the state's Democratic governor the "deployment of all necessary federal law enforcement."

The gunman shot his victims, all students, during a rampage on the Michigan State University (MSU) campus before dying of a self-inflicted gunshot wound several hours later.

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