

Saarc to get next secretary general from Bangladesh

DIPLMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Ending months of speculation, Saarc has agreed to nominate its new secretary general from Bangladesh, foreign ministry officials said.

The new general secretary was supposed to be from Afghanistan, but Saarc has yet to recognise the Taliban regime that came to power in 2021.

The tenure of the current general secretary, Esala Ruwan Weerakoon of Sri Lanka, ends in March.

This would be the third secretary general of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) from Bangladesh.

The two Bnagladeshis to occupy the post were Abul Ahsan, January 1985 – October 1989, and QAMA Rahim, January 2002 – February 2005.

According to the foreign ministry officials, the appointment of the secretary general is decided in the English alphabetical order of the seven member states. After Sri Lanka, it was Afghanistan's turn to nominate the secretary general.

Quoting a Nepal foreign ministry official, Kathmandu Post reported, "We have agreed that Bangladesh should be given the role, which is a less controversial choice and sets the tone for keeping alive the stalled Saarc process."

Nepal has been the chair of the regional bloc since 2014. No new summit was held since then due to the India-Pakistan tension.

Madrasa teacher gets life in jail for raping boy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka tribunal yesterday sentenced a madrasa teacher to life imprisonment for raping a nine-year-old boy in the city's Dakkhinkhan area in 2019.

Judge Begum Shamsunnahar of Dhaka's Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal-5 handed down the verdict in the presence of the convict, Md Hasmat Ali, a teacher of Al Quasim Markajut Tawfiz Madrasa. The tribunal also fined him Tk 50,000, in default of which, he will have to serve three additional months in jail.

Subsequently, Hasmat was sent to Dhaka Central Jail in Keraniganj with a conviction warrant.

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Students of Dhaka University's Fine Arts faculty painting murals on the wall next to the Central Shaheed Minar yesterday, to honour the language martyrs, ahead of the International Mother Language Day tomorrow.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

TURKEY-SYRIA EARTHQUAKE Rescue efforts wind down

Many left to mourn without funeral; death toll surpasses 46,400

AGENCIES

Rescue efforts in earthquake-hit Turkey were winding down yesterday, nearly two weeks after the country's deadliest disaster in the modern era, with many praying only for bodies to mourn.

"Would you pray to find a dead body? We do ... to deliver the body to the family," said bulldozer operator Alkin Bozkurt as his machine clawed at the rubble of a destroyed building in the town of Kahramanmaraş.

"You recover a body from under tonnes of rubble. Families are waiting with hope," Bozkurt said. "They want to have a burial ceremony. They want a grave."

The head of Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), Yunus Sezer, said the search and rescue efforts would largely end at night.

More than 46,400 people have been killed after the quake struck Turkey and Syria on February 6. "The death toll due to the earthquakes rose to 40,642, and the work of searching and rescue for people stuck under the debris has ended in most

of the provinces," Sezar said.

In Syria, more than 5,800 deaths have been reported, mostly in the northwest. The figure has not changed for several days.

The toll is expected to climb, with some 345,000 apartments in Turkey now known to have been destroyed and many people still missing. Neither Turkey nor Syria have said how many people are still unaccounted for following the quake, reports Reuters.

Orhan Tatar, General Director of Earthquake and Risk Reduction at Turkey's Disaster Management, reiterated yesterday that the Eastern Anatolian Fault broke apart in five different branches, with 25 kilometres of fractures measured in the province of Malatya alone.

Some 400 kilometres of surface fractures and deformation on the earth's crust resulted in large shifts, with the largest measured at 7.3 metres with a depth of eight to nine kilometres.

In one of the last efforts to pull people out of the rubble 12 days after the earthquake, emergency teams on Saturday night began clearing debris with their hands at a rescue

site in Antakya.

Search dogs and thermal cameras had detected signs of life from two people, rescuers said, but just after midnight, eight hours into the operation, the teams called off the rescue.

"No one is alive," said Mujdat Erdogan, a member of AFAD, his face and uniform covered in dust. "I don't think we can rescue people anymore."

The World Health Organization estimates that some 26 million people across both Turkey and Syria need humanitarian aid.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in Turkey yesterday to discuss how Washington can further assist Ankara as it grapples with the aftermath of its worst natural disaster in modern times.

In Syria, the World Food Programme (WFP) said authorities in the northwest of the country were blocking access to the area.

The group Doctors Without Borders yesterday called for the "urgent scaling up" of aid to northwest Syria, reports AFP.

German parliamentary delegation to visit Dhaka on Feb 22-26

DIPLMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A six-member delegation of German parliamentarians will visit Bangladesh on February 22-26 to foster strong ties between the two nations.

The delegation will meet representatives of the Jatiya Sangsad, government officials, civil society members and business dignitaries, read a statement of the German embassy in Dhaka yesterday.

"They will discuss with their Bangladeshi counterparts various issues of mutual concern, including the deepening of the 50-year-long bilateral relations, politics, climate change, human rights, trade, migration, development cooperation and women empowerment," read the statement.

Renate Künast, a former minister of the German government, will lead the delegation.

Body of student found hanging at madrasa

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Police recovered the hanging body of a student at a madrasa in Tangail's Kalihati early yesterday.

The victim is Mohammad Rakibul, 11, son of Badiuzzaman, of Tenguria village, said police.

He was admitted to Jannatul Ferdous Madrasa only 22 days ago, said Rakibul's mother Rimi Akter.

"In such a short time, my son fled the madrasa and came home four times. Asked, every time he said a teacher beat him. Now, the madrasa authorities are saying he died by suicide. How could my child hang himself?" she asked.

She demanded a proper investigation into the death.

Necessary steps will be taken after getting the autopsy report, said Mollah Azizul Haque, officer-in-charge of Kalihati Police Station.

N Korea says it fired ICBM as warning to US, Seoul

AFP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday it had test-fired an intercontinental ballistic missile as a warning to Washington and Seoul, saying the successful "surprise" drill demonstrated Pyongyang's capacity to launch a "fatal nuclear counterattack".

In response, the United States and South Korea staged joint air drills featuring a strategic bomber and stealth fighter jets, Seoul said. The United States and Japan also held a joint military drill on Sunday, Tokyo's defence ministry said.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered the "sudden launching drill" at 8:00 am Saturday (2300 GMT Friday) and a Hwasong-15 missile, a weapon first tested by the North in 2017, was fired from Pyongyang airport that afternoon, the official KCNA reported.

IMF getting BB ready

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the interest rate at which the central bank borrows funds from banks, also called the reverse repo rate.

The benefit of having the corridor is that it gives the central bank more control over inflation and also helps support the currency.

From the next fiscal year, the monetary policy would be targeting this interest rate corridor, which will inform the inflation outlook and also support growth objectives.

This would help bring down inflation to 5-6 percent, from upwards of 8 percent at present.

In line with the move to the interest rate-based system, BB has relaxed the lending interest rate cap on consumer loans (14 percent of total loans) and stands committed to removing other caps over the programme period, the letter of intent said.

"We plan to strengthen BB's communication and enhance transparency of the monetary policy by streamlining our key monetary policy report, the Monetary Policy Statement (MPS), and increasing the frequency of publication (to twice-a-year starting from January 2023)."

A press release and governor press conference will follow each policy decision meeting, it said.

At the same time, the government is committed to letting the exchange rate float, which is allowing the market forces to determine the value of the taka.

Greater exchange rate flexibility will help accumulate reserves, strengthen external buffers and build resilience, the IMF said.

"We remain committed to increasing resilience to external shocks by reforming the exchange rate and foreign exchange reserve management framework."

The fallout from Russia's war in Ukraine resulted in disorderly foreign market conditions, freezing the interbank market.

"We fully acknowledge the importance to have a single exchange rate. As foreign availability increases, the market mechanism will ensure transition to a single exchange rate for all participants," the letter added.

BB will strengthen reserves management and will start compiling and reporting the official

gross international reserves (GIR) as per the Balance of Payments and International Investment Position Manual (BPM6) in June.

As per the lender's balance of payments and investment position manual (BPM6), gross foreign reserves calculation does not include the various funds that the Bangladesh Bank has formed from the reserves as well as the loan guarantees provided for Biman, the currency swap with Sri Lanka, the loan to Payra Port Authority and the below-investment-grade securities.

"Monetary and exchange rate policy reforms under the programme will be properly sequenced to exploit synergies," the IMF said.

The interest rate corridor and the floating exchange rate system are both necessary, said Mansur, a former economist of the IMF.

"We cannot go for floating exchange rate and interest rate corridor just for the sake of it. We have to create the conditions for these to work."

And for that, the monetary policy must be tightened and the taka must be made more attractive by way of interest rate, said Mansur, also the chairman of Brac Bank.

The reserves must be fortified before the taka is allowed to float, or else economic woes not dissimilar to Egypt might transpire.

After three devaluations in 2022, the Central Bank of Egypt floated the pound in January to meet an IMF condition for a \$3 billion loan, the country's fourth bailout from the fund since 2016.

The move, coupled with a foreign currency crunch causing shortages in imported goods, has sent inflation soaring and imposed even greater hardship on millions of poor families.

The Egyptian pound has halved in value against the dollar, falling from EE15.8 to the US currency in March 2022 to EE30.5 last week.

Annual urban inflation stood at 25.8 per cent in January, its highest level in five years. Annual food price inflation in urban areas soared 48 per cent in January.

"Rules for the game must be taught," Mansur added.

Panic as fire engulfs Gulshan high-rise

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As the flames consumed the flats, three people could be seen jumping off the 11th floor to escape. One of them died.

Grieving family members identified the victim at Dhaka Medical College morgue as 30-year-old Anwar, who was the caretaker of a flat.

Another person who jumped from the seventh floor is Shama Rahman Sinha, 37. She was being treated at the ICU of Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery with critical injuries.

"The woman also has minor burns on her back," said Prof Samanta Lal Sen, chief coordinator of burn institutes.

Shama is the wife of Fahim Sinha, director of ACME Group, Bangladesh Cricket Board, and Abahani Cricket Academy.

Their cook Raju was undergoing treatment at the ICU of a nearby hospital.

According to relatives, Shama was able to send her three children and mother-in-law downstairs on the lift after the fire broke out.

When the lift came back to the 12th floor, she got on it but was stuck on the seventh floor due to the

power outage.

Then she got out of the elevator and got onto the balcony of the seventh floor. As the flames started growing, she jumped into the swimming pool next to the building.

Brig Gen Main Uddin, director



general of the fire department, told reporters after 11:00pm that three people suffered burn injuries, and the firefighters were conducting a "search operation".

He added the cause of the fire and whether there were proper fire safety measures would be known after the operation.

A firefighter who participated in the search operation told The Daily Star that it seemed a power cable of an AC caused it.

No bar for Khaleda to do politics

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health would allow her to engage in politics.

Talking to reporters after an event in Dhaka, he said Khaleda would not be able to run in elections as she has been sentenced for more than two years.

Asked if Khaleda had any scope for returning to politics, the law minister said, "This is a dead issue. There is no necessity to make any comment on this issue. Nevertheless, I want to make it clear that it had been written in the letter [of her family seeking her release on executive order] that her health condition was so poor that her life might be in danger if she was not provided with proper treatment. Now tell me, can she being this sick take part in politics?"

"I don't need to say what she will do. She was released from jail under section 401 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) with the sympathy of the prime minister as she was sick. We did not write [impose condition] that she cannot do politics."

The law minister said Khaleda has been released on two conditions. "But there was no condition in the release application that she cannot do politics. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina-led government feels that it is not right to interfere in such freedoms..." he said.

Anisul said as per article 66 of the constitution, if anyone is convicted and sentenced to two years or more for moral turpitude, he or she cannot run in any election (for five years after serving the time).

Khaleda has been convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case and seven years in the Zia Charitable

onlookers standing there."

Survivor Rowshan Ali, 35, a staffer of a buying house, said he went to the house of Arif Ibrahim, managing director of the company, for some consultation.

He said he entered the 10th floor apartment around 6:40pm and was waiting at the drawing room with the MD's driver Musa. After some time, they started smelling smoke.

At one point, they opened the flat's entrance door and saw huge smoke clouding the area. They rushed to the lift, but found it switched off. Soon he and Musa ran to a balcony while the MD, his wife, two sons, a domestic help and Musa's wife ran here and there for safety.

Standing on the balcony, they tried frantically to draw the attention of firefighters who were working at the opposite side of the building by torching mobile phones and throwing whatever they found around.

He said at one point he felt unconscious. Firefighters broke the balcony grill and rescued him and Musa.

"I cannot even think I'm still alive," he told The Daily Star after regaining consciousness following the rescue.

Trust corruption case.

DATA PROTECTION ACT

Anisul said the government would hold talks with stakeholders on the proposed Data Protection Act before the draft is placed before the cabinet.

"We have earlier discussed with stakeholders and will continue to do so. This law will be formulated only to protect the data not to control data," he added.

"Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are the fundamental rights under the constitution gifted by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina-led government is a people-serving government. If anybody thinks that her government will formulate such a law curtailing the freedom of expression and freedom of the press, they are not right."