

GRADUATION OF LDCS Global co-op needed to keep up momentum

Says PM at event in Qatar

UNB, Doha

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday called for a meaningful global partnership to make sure that no challenges can hold back the graduation momentum of the LDCs, including Bangladesh, to become the developing countries.

"We, the graduating LDCs, want to make sure that no challenges can further slow down our graduation momentum," she said.

The prime minister was speaking at a side event titled "Sustainable and Smooth Transition for the Graduating Cohort of 2021" organised by Bangladesh, Lao PDR and Nepal held at Qatar National Convention Centre (QNCC).

She said that the graduating countries, including Bangladesh, are making all possible efforts to mitigate such challenges by developing the domestic capacity and enhancing competitiveness.

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Modi felicitates president-elect Shahabuddin

UNB, Dhaka

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended his heartfelt congratulations to 22nd president-elect of Bangladesh Mohammed Shahabuddin.

In a recent congratulatory message to Shahabuddin, Modi said, "On behalf of the government and the people of India, I wish to extend warmest congratulations to you on your election as the President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

"Your contribution as a freedom fighter and experience as a jurist brings great value to this high office."

The Indian prime minister said that the two countries have a unique bilateral relationship which is firmly rooted in countries' shared sacrifices and is nurtured by vibrant cultural and people-to-people ties.

"As a close friend of Bangladesh, we remain steadfast in our commitment to further deepen this multifaceted partnership for the benefit of the people of both our countries. I am confident that under your visionary leadership our engagement will continue to grow from strength to strength," the Indian premier added.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in a meeting with Qatar Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani at the Qatar National Convention Centre yesterday.

PHOTO: BSS

PROTECTING HIGH SEAS UN member states agree 'historic' deal

Environmental groups say it will help reverse marine biodiversity losses

AFP, United Nations

UN member states have finally agreed to a text on the first international treaty after years of negotiations to protect the high seas, a fragile and vital treasure that covers nearly half the planet.

"The ship has reached the shore," conference chair Rena Lee announced at the UN headquarters in New York shortly before 9:30pm (0230 GMT yesterday), to loud and lengthy applause from delegates.

The exact wording of the text was not immediately released but environmental groups say the deal will help reverse marine biodiversity losses and ensure sustainable development after more than 15 years of discussions.

The treaty is seen as essential to conserving 30 percent of the world's land and ocean by 2030, as agreed by world governments in a historic accord signed in Montreal in December.

"This is a historic day for conservation and a sign that in a divided world,

protecting nature and people can triumph over geopolitics," said Greenpeace's Laura Meller.

EU environment commissioner Virginijus Sinkevicius yesterday called the treaty "a crucial step forward to preserve the marine life and biodiversity that are essential for us and the generations to come."

Following two weeks of intense talks, including a marathon overnight session Friday into Saturday, delegates finalized a text that now cannot be significantly altered.

"There will be no reopening or discussions of substance," Lee told negotiators.

The agreement will be formally adopted at a later date once it has been vetted by lawyers and translated into the United Nations' six official languages, she announced.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres commended the delegates, according to a spokesperson who said the agreement

was a "victory for multilateralism and for global efforts to counter the destructive trends facing ocean health, now and for generations to come."

The high seas begin at the border of countries' exclusive economic zones, which extend up to 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers) from coastlines. They thus fall under the jurisdiction of no country.

Even though the high seas comprise more than 60 percent of the world's oceans and nearly half the planet's surface, they have long drawn far less attention than coastal waters and a few iconic species.

Ocean ecosystems create half the oxygen humans breathe and limit global warming by absorbing much of the carbon dioxide emitted by human activities.

But they are threatened by climate change, pollution and overfishing. Only about one percent of the high seas are currently protected.

When the new treaty comes into force it will allow the creation of marine protected areas in these international waters.

Criminals cut off madrasa teacher's tongue

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

A group of criminals cut off a madrasa teacher's tongue in Brahmanbaria's Akhaura early yesterday. Shariful Islam Bhuiyan, 36, lecturer of Arabic at Sreepur Islamia Fazil Madrasa in Bijoynagar, came under attack when he was returning from a religious gathering after delivering sermon, said police.

He was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital in critical condition, said his family members.

A group of seven to eight men attacked him near Azampur Railway Station, said victim's brother Maududul Islam Bhuiyan.

Obaidullah, 34, who was accompanying Shariful, also sustained injuries during the attack, he added.

Police are aware of the attack but no one filed any complaint in this connection, said Asadul Islam, officer-in-charge of Akhaura Police Station.

SAGAR-RUNI MURDER

Rab gets 96th extension for probe report submission

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday extended till April 9 the deadline for submitting the probe report of a case filed over the murders of journalist couple Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi in February 2012.

This is the 96th extension of the deadline for the probe report submission.

Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Md Rashidul Alam passed the order after Rab Additional Superintendent of Police Khondoker Md Shafiqul Alam, also the case's investigation officer, failed to submit the report yesterday, court sources said.

On January 4, the same court asked Rab to submit the probe report by yesterday.

Earlier, two separate courts expressed dissatisfaction over the probe, and the investigators' failure to unearth the motive behind the murders and arrest the real culprits.

Teenage boy killed in road accident

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A teenage boy was killed after being hit by a bus in the capital's Jatrabari area yesterday morning.

Miraj Hossain, 15, son of bus driver Akram Hossain, was going to Golapbagh from his home in Sayedabad to meet his father, said victim's uncle Younus Ali Khan.

Around 10:30am, a bus of Tisha Plus Paribahan hit the boy when he was crossing the road near a ramp of Mayor Hanif Flyover, he added.

Miraj was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him, said Tanvir Hossain, sub-inspector of Jatrabari Police Station.

Police seized the bus and detained its driver after the accident.

Illegal Saudi visa trade busted

FROM PAGE 1

Saleh Mohammed Saleh Al-Shalout of Palestine.

The arrested ministry officials are sergeant of the Court Security (Riyadh Police) Metab Saad Al-Ghnoom, and corporal of the Special Missions Forces in Riyadh Hatem Mastoor Saad bin Tayeb.

Upon further investigation, Bangladeshi expats Ashraf Uddin Aknad, Almgbeer Hussain Khan, and Shafeeq Al Islam Shahjahan were arrested.

The three Bangladeshis, the Palestinian, and the two ministry officials admitted to engaging in illegal visa trading with the complicity of the employees of the Saudi embassy in Bangladesh.

"...By searching their homes, 20,180,000 SR [about Tk 57.54 crore] was found in cash, as well as gold ingots, and luxury vehicles, which turned out to be the proceeds of illegally selling work visas in the Kingdom," reads a tweet.

The other Bangladeshis arrestees are recruitment agency owner Mohammed Nasser Uddin Noor, and Al Ameen Khan, Zaid Uossied Mafy, Abul Kalam Mohammed Rafeeq Al Islam and Aziz Al Haq.

They were arrested for involvement in illegal visa trading and money smuggling outside the kingdom.

"Nazaha affirms on the continuation to pursue anyone who exploits the public office to achieve personal gain or harm public interest in any way, and that the accountability extends far beyond the retirement of individuals, as these types of crimes have no statute of limitations," it tweeted.

Saudi Ambassador to Bangladesh Essa Yousef did not comment when contacted by The Daily Star yesterday.

HOW THE SCAM HAPPENED IN DHAKA

Sources in Dhaka told this newspaper that three Saudi embassy officials were suspended around two months ago for taking bribes from recruiting agencies for issuing work visas. The third official who has not been arrested is yet to be identified.

The findings by the Saudi anti-graft body were corroborated by several international recruiting agents of Bangladesh.

According to them, the Saudi embassy in Dhaka about a year ago started charging recruiting agencies \$220 to \$250 for every work visa.

"The embassy suddenly set a rule that one recruiting agency would not be allowed to submit more than 20 visa applications a week and an agency would submit applications only once a week," a recruiting agent said.

However, many agencies had several hundred passports to deal with. As they were desperate to have the work visas issued within a certain period, some individuals at the embassy started taking money.

"Thus, the visas were issued in exchange for money. Interestingly, we had to pay in dollars when there was a shortage of dollars in the country," a recruiting agent told The Daily Star.

The malpractice, however, stopped after the Saudi officials concerned were sent back to Saudi Arabia, the agent added.

Bangladesh's labour recruitment to Saudi Arabia surged phenomenally last year, with a total of 612,412 migrating to the kingdom. In the first two months of this year, 85,319 migrated there.

Interestingly, migrant remittance from the kingdom, where some 20 lakh Bangladeshis work, declined over the last two quarters.

Lax monitoring, lack of safety gear to blame

FROM PAGE 1

But Sheema Group maintains all its papers are up-to-date and the plant had all kinds of fire extinguisher tools.

"It was an accident during operation. Please don't blame us," said Md Najim Uddin, a director of Sheema Group, which operates two oxygen factories, steel re-rolling mills and shipbreaking yards at Sitakundu.

No case was filed in connection with the deadly explosion as of 6:00pm, Tofoyel Ahmed, the officer-in-charge of Sitakunda Model Police Station, told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, another Sitakundu blast victim Probesh Lal Sharma, 55, who was undergoing treatment at the ICU of CMCH, died around 11:35pm, said CMCH Director Brig

Gen Shamim Ahsan.

The factory owners were missing and there was no contact from them after the incident, said Abul Bashar Md Fakhruzzaman, deputy commissioner of Chattogram District.

Abdul Alim, managing director of Sheema Oxygen, arrived at the site 19 hours after the incident, which claimed six lives and injured more than 25 persons.

"It is not true that we were missing -- we were busy with ensuring treatment for the injured in various hospitals. Our priority was to rush the injured to the hospitals to save their lives and we did that," said Najim, also the MD of Sheema Steel Re-rolling Mills.

Sheema Group will bear all the

treatment costs of the injured and financially support the family of the deceased, he said.

"We are not sure how the incident took place but we will compensate the deceased and injured," Alim said.

Meanwhile, the blast also damaged two nearby factories -- Harun Steel Re-Rolling Mill and Rubaiya Oxygen Plant -- bringing their production to a halt. So ferocious was the explosion at around 4:40 pm on Sunday that the factories' walls and machinery were blown away.

The blast affected the electricity line causing a power cut in the Keshabpur area. Sheema Oxygen plant's roof blew off and large chunks of steel and iron flew in all directions, damaging numerous buildings and vehicles.

Massive fire tears thru Rohingya camps

FROM PAGE 1

Palongkhali union and quickly spread to adjacent Camps 10 and 9.

Fire service sources said that the flames quickly spread from one hut to the next in the densely populated camps since they are mostly made of bamboo and tarpaulin.

On information, 10 firefighting units rushed to the spot and brought the blaze under control around 5:00pm.

"I couldn't save anything. Everything burnt to ashes. Many are without homes. I don't know what will happen to us," said 40-year-old refugee Selim Ullah, a father of six children, reports Reuters.

"When we were in Myanmar we faced lots of problems... our houses were burned down, he said. "Now it has happened again."

It was primarily believed that

the fire was caused by a cooking cylinder explosion, reports Al Jazeera, however, this newspaper could not independently verify this fact till the writing of this report.

Ukhiya Police Station Officer-in-Charge Sheikh Mohammad Ali said police arrested a youth for his alleged involvement in the incident and that they were interrogating him.

Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Md Mizanur Rahman said journalists and other camp residents were being evacuated away from the affected area to a safer location.

"We currently don't have an estimate for damages and there were no reports of casualties till the evening," he said adding that, some injured Rohingyas were rushed to hospitals.

Fires are a continual hazard in Cox's

Bazar, where more than one million people live in extremely crowded conditions, with bamboo and tarpaulin shelters packed closely together.

Similar fires occurred in January 2022 and March 2021. While the fire in 2022 only damaged some 1,200 homes, the massive blaze in 2021 killed at least 15 refugees, including 6 children, and destroyed over 9,000 homes.

The settlement hosts more than a million people and is the world's largest refugee camp. Most of those living in it were forced to flee Myanmar in 2017 when the military launched a brutal crackdown against the minority, which a UN report later said was carried out with "genocidal intent".

Conditions in Myanmar have worsened since a military takeover in 2021, and all attempts to send back the refugees have so far failed.

3 killed as blast ravages commercial building

FROM PAGE 1

The walls on the second floor collapsed and shards of glass and brick chunks were blown to nearby areas, witnesses said.

Four fire engines brought the fire under control around 11:15am.

Abdul Qadir, a security guard of an adjacent 14-storey building, said, "The explosion was so strong that the entire area trembled. Shortly afterwards, the residents of the building started coming out on to the street in panic. I saw people lying in front of the three-story building and everything was destroyed."

There were offices of an insurance company and a stationery product supplier on the second floor.

Deceased Shafiquzzaman Shafiq, 42, a computer operator; Sadikur Rahman Tusher, 31, a storekeeper; and Abdul Mannan, 63, an office assistant; were staffers of the stationery supplier.

"The three died on the spot. Something heavy fell on them during the blast," said Prof ANSM Sharfuzzaman, a doctor of the Popular Medical College Hospital which is close to the scene.

Mannan had been working there for over four decades.

His wife Shahida Begum told The Daily Star, "We lost our only nine-year-

old daughter 33 days ago, and now my husband is gone. How are we going to survive now?"

Shafiq had worked there for 22 years and Tusher for eight.

An official of the Popular Medical College Hospital said they initially received about 40 injured.

A woman with 20 percent burns was admitted to the ICU and two men were admitted to the High Dependency Unit, he said.

Thirteen patients went to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital and Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery, said Inspector Bacchu Mia, in-charge of the DMCH police outpost.

Five insurance company employees, including Zahur Ali with 44 percent burns, Ayesha Akter Asha with 38 percent burns, and Akbar Ali with 37 percent burns, were admitted to the burn institute, said Dr Samanta Lal Sen, coordinator of the institute.

A Dhaka University student and an autorickshaw driver also suffered critical head injuries in the explosion.

Traffic movement on Mirpur Road -- from Science Lab to Nilkhet intersection -- remained suspended for hours.

A team from the Bangladesh Army, and the bomb disposal unit of

Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) went to the scene to find out what caused the blast. They ruled out explosives and suspected that accumulated gas might have caused the explosion.

"With our detector, we have found the presence of gas at the scene. The massive scale of damage also suggests that the blast was caused by accumulated gas," Rahmat Ullah Chowdhury, in-charge of the bomb disposal unit, told The Daily Star, adding that the gas could have been from a leak in the pipeline or it could have come from the sewer.

"An explosion may occur if there is presence of 5-12 percent gas in the air of a confined space," he said.

Brig Gen Md Main Uddin, director general (DG) of Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence, also said they suspect gas to be the cause.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner Khandker Golam Faruq ruled out sabotage and initiated a probe into the incident.

Contacted, Akram Hossain, owner of the stationery supplying company, said he had raised concerns about the safety and maintenance of the building but no action was taken as the owner lives abroad.

The Daily Star could not reach the owner of the building for comments.