

Macron to visit Dhaka Sept 10

Says French embassy; Indo-Pacific cooperation, climate change on agenda

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

France has formally announced President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Bangladesh on September 10 that will focus on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, deepening bilateral trade relations, and climate change.

He will travel to Dhaka after attending the G20 summit in New Delhi on September 9-10 and is scheduled to hold a meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Hasina, who will also take part in the summit and meet Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi possibly on September 8, will return to Dhaka from New Delhi on September 10 and welcome the French president.

"It will also be an opportunity to deepen our bilateral relations with a country that is experiencing rapid economic growth and seeking to diversify its partnerships," says the official Facebook page of the French embassy in Dhaka.

The statement says Bangladesh and France show great convergence in the face of global challenges, particularly within the framework of the Paris Agenda for Peoples and the Planet, which Bangladesh actively supports.

"Since the country is particularly vulnerable to climate change, the president will recall France's determination to stand by Bangladesh on its humanitarian front, in particular in the face of regular floods."

The French embassy said Bangladesh is also an important contributor to international solidarity actions, whether through its contingents in peacekeeping operations or in hosting Rohingya refugees.

About Macron's attending the G20 summit, the embassy said it will allow the president to maintain the constant dialogue with his counterparts from all continents.



A firefighter works at a site that was hit amid Russian drone attacks, at a location given as Odesa region, Ukraine in this image released yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Xi to skip G20 summit

China to send Premier Li Qiang; Biden disappointed

AFP, Beijing

Premier Li Qiang will lead China's delegation to the G20 summit in India this weekend, Beijing said yesterday, all but confirming President Xi Jinping will snub the meeting of the world's biggest economies.

Speculation and media reports have swirled for the past week that Xi would snub the event, but China had remained silent on the issue.

US President Joe Biden has said he would be "disappointed" to see Xi skip the gathering of world leaders in New Delhi.

Beijing's foreign ministry confirmed yesterday that Li would be at the G20 Leaders' Summit on Saturday and Sunday, which it described as an important forum for economic cooperation.

PRE-, POST-POLLS SECURITY SCENARIO

US official enquires civil society members

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Regional Security Mira Resnick, who reached Dhaka yesterday for security dialogue, has enquired about the pre- and post-election security scenarios in Bangladesh and the regional security challenges.

The official of the US Bureau of Political-Military Affairs exchanged views with the civil society groups on human rights, civilian security and strategic security risks of Bangladesh and its defence relations with China and other countries in the region, according to two civil society members who preferred not to be named.

"I think the US official is assessing the overall security situation in Bangladesh



Mira Resnick

ahead of the elections," a civil society member, who was present at a meeting with Mira at the US embassy in Dhaka, told The Daily Star.

The US has repeatedly called for a free and fair election in Bangladesh against the backdrop of two previous parliamentary polls marred by allegations of irregularities. The country in May this year announced a visa policy against Bangladeshis who seek to "undermine the democratic election process".

Today, Mira is set to lead the US delegation to the ninth US-Bangladesh Security Dialogue. The Bangladesh delegation will be led by foreign ministry Director General (North America wing)

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No more 3-day voice, data packs

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packages. Is it possible for customers to choose from 95 packages and remember those? This takes the level of people's confusion to extreme heights. So, we are cutting it down to 40," he told The Daily Star.

When asked if the move curbs the freedom of choice, he said: "With this, a new system is being introduced to break the autocratic attitude of operators who have been bombarding customers with a web of plans."

Curiously, at the programme on May 30 where the BTRC survey result was shared, many of the customers who spoke said they wanted more packages, particularly targeted for OTT media consumption and students.

Subsequently, the operators vehemently opposed the impending BTRC move and said it is not reasonable "in a world where consumer preference for options is vast and wide-ranging".

"Every product that operators offer is based on an analysis of the diverse demands of the consumers from various demographics," said the Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh (Amtob), the trade body for carriers, in a letter to BTRC on August 7.

The synergy between market offerings and customer demand may be broken if there are any abrupt changes made to the offer modalities as a result of frequent regulatory interventions.

Just in March 2022, the BTRC ordered operators to bring down the number of packages to 95 from a few hundred packages each.

Subsequently, Amtob urged the telecom regulator to reconsider its proposed changes, which will have "grave consequences on the industry".

But the BTRC went ahead and issued the directive on Sunday. Discontinuing the three-day packs, it seems, is the more polemic among the directives.

A large segment of grassroots people use data for entertainment and other purposes besides connectivity, said TIM Nurul Kabir, a former secretary general of Amtob.

And they mostly opt for the affordable three-day packs.

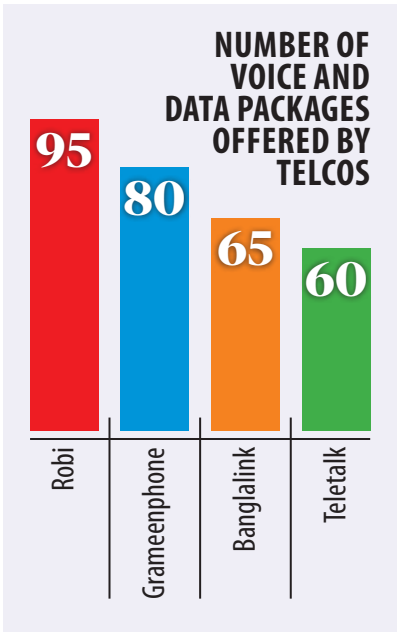
"If the option to purchase data for a short time with lower expenditure is eliminated, it will be very inconvenient for them. Customers

should always have flexibility in choosing options, and denying this would be unjustified," he added.

Asked if the customers who avail three-day packages now will have to spend more for the minimum seven-day plans, AKM Habibur Rahman, managing director of Teletalk, said: "Undoubtedly -- it is not possible to offer the seven-day packages at the same rate as the three-day ones."

As much as 48 percent of Banglalink's 4.2 crore-odd customers regularly purchase the three-day packs and just 3 percent avail of the 15-day plans, according to Taimur Rahman, its chief corporate and regulatory affairs officer.

"Discontinuing the three-day packs will have a huge impact on customers, specifically those who have a limited budget," he added.



Similarly, Robi, the second-largest carrier with 5.7 crore users, has the highest number of takers for its three-day packages: 50 percent of the recharges come from it, while 7 percent come from 15-day plans.

There are more than 11 crore unique mobile subscribers, who have a wide array of demands and requirements, said Shahed Alam, head of regulatory affairs at Robi. Meeting these demands with a mere 40 packages poses a significant challenge for the operators.

"This decision is poised to have a detrimental impact on customers' ability to select the packages that best suit their preferences and the overall cost of their mobile phone usage."

Furthermore, discontinuing the three-day packages will disproportionately affect students and individuals with limited data needs.

"The decision lacks a foundation in data or research conducted by the telecom regulator, and the findings, if any, were inconclusive," Alam added.

Subscribers more often than not fail to use up the data in the three-day packages, said BTRC Chairman Shyam Sunder Sikder.

"There is an option for customers to carry forward their unused data if they purchase the same package. But many customers were unaware of this and are ultimately deprived."

So the telecom operator is doing away with the three-day packages, he added.

"We are currently assessing the regulatory move," said Hossain Sadat, spokesman of Grameenphone, the market leader with 8.2 crore subscribers as of July.

The regulator can fix the number of packages an operator can offer to reduce customer confusion of customers, but setting the durations of packages is too much regulation, said Ghulam Rahman, president of Consumers Association of Bangladesh.

"It should be set by operators based on their customers' needs," he added.

A regulatory authority should seek the opinions of stakeholders -- operators and customers -- and conduct a thorough survey before making such an important decision that will undoubtedly affect millions of people, said Shahdeen Malik, an eminent jurist and a constitutional expert.

"It would be tantamount to incompetence if a regulator conducts an online survey with only 550 participants for this. I would say it is a misuse of power by a regulatory authority."

Furthermore, if the revenue of mobile companies, one of the biggest sources of government revenue, were to decline, it would have significant implications for public finances.

"It's not that I want the operators' revenue to increase, but from a national standpoint, their revenue is important for the government, especially considering current budgetary constraints," Malik added.

Tk 821 crore laundered in name of export

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other companies, and not these companies.

Meanwhile, in a press release yesterday, the CIID said as many as 10 RMG factories laundered about Tk 300 crore in the name of export.

However, this figure is included in the Tk 821 crore laundered by the 33 RMG companies and buying houses since 2017.

THE FORGERY

Customs officials said some exporters use fake bank documents, sales contracts, letters of credit, and export permits to launder money.

To launder money, fraudsters often use Code 20 on the NBR server, which denotes sending "samples" to the importers before the actual export. In this case, there is no question of export earnings. Another popular way to launder money is under invoicing -- either by quoting low prices or low weights of the export items in the shipping documents.

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Referring to the available evidence collected so far, he said, "Everything points at the involvement of insiders with access to the warehouse, rather than an outsider."

Investigators said there were no CCTV cameras within the customs warehouse.

Tohidul Islam, additional deputy commissioner of Uttara Division Police, said there was a CCTV camera at the entrance of the customs warehouse.

"But we came to know that the camera was not working on the night of September 1 when the gold was reportedly stolen from the warehouse," he said.

According to the first information report filed on Sunday by Dhaka Customs House with Airport Police Station, the theft took place on September 1.

Meanwhile, police detained the four security guards -- Rezaul Karim, Mozammel Haq, Afzal Hossain, and Niamat Hawlader -- of the customs house for interrogation early yesterday.

One of the investigators said Niamat had failed to give satisfactory answers to questions asked about the theft.

"There is a major gap between Niamat's digital movement and statement. So, we are closely investigating his role in the incident," the official said, requesting anonymity.

In another development, police yesterday evening detained the four Assistant Revenue Officers (AROs) --

For example, four companies -- Asia Trading Corporation, Sabiha Saiki Fashion, Emu Trading Corporation, and Ilham -- used Code 20 to ship at least 1,780 consignments between January 2020 and December 2022. While the permissible RMG samples usually range from 10kgs to 100kgs, each of those consignments weighed more than 10,000kgs, the CIID report said. These consignments could leave the port as the NBR server and the customs officials did not flag those, the report added.

Through under invoicing, the rest 29 exporters shipped 14,878 tonnes of RMG goods worth Tk 554 crore, but they showed only Tk 111 crore in export earnings.

The average price of a T-shirt was shown Tk 12 to Tk 21 and a pair of pants Tk 17 to Tk 54, which is four to ten times lower than the actual cost.

Asia Trading Corporation Director (operations) Mahmud Alam, Emu Trading Company Managing

Director Abdul Kader, Ilham owner Nurul Amin, Sabiha Saiki Fashion Managing Director Md Shakil and Hong Kong Fashion Ltd Managing Director Mizanur Rahman said they have nothing to do with the forgery.

"My company has been closed since 2019. I do not know who exported these products," said Mahmud Alam.

Mizanur Rahman also blamed some unknown gangs, and demanded their punishment.

CIID Director General Mohammad Fakhru Alam said both the amount laundered and the number of companies involved may increase as investigations continue.

"We are collecting information about the Inland Container Depots (ICD) and the banks concerned, as well as the NBR server to verify more than 10,000 consignments. When we started working on four companies at the beginning of this year, found evidence of huge money laundering," he added.

Next year SSC in February, HSC in June

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Next year's Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and equivalent examinations are likely to be held in February, while the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and equivalent exams are scheduled for June.

The Inter-Education Board Coordination Committee issued an office order regarding this matter yesterday.

The notification, signed by its head, Professor Tapan Kumar Sarkar, states that the SSC exam will take place in the second week of February, and the HSC exam will be conducted in the second week of June.

HSC exams will be held with a curtailed syllabus, while SSC exams will be held in full syllabus, the notification said.

21-day-old snatched from home

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

A 21-day-old infant was snatched from a house in Haripur area of Habiganj's Sadar upazila yesterday while her parents were asleep.

The missing infant is the second child of Babul Mia and Liza Begum. They are now devastated after the sudden disappearance of their only daughter.

According to police, a case was filed in this regard and efforts are on to locate the infant and safely return her to her parents.

Md Badiuzzaman, officer-in-charge of Habiganj Model Police Station, told The Daily Star that after receiving the complaint late last night, a police team went to the spot and started an investigation last morning.

GAS BLAST ON TRAWLER

One dies at CMCH, 8 battle for life

UNB, Chattogram

A fisherman on Sunday night died from injuries he sustained in a gas cylinder explosion on a fishing trawler in Cox's Bazar town.

Osman Gani, 20, breathed his last while undergoing treatment at Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH), where he was admitted with 60 percent burns.

On Friday morning, 11 fishermen suffered burn injuries after a gas cylinder exploded inside a trawler at ghat-6 of Nuniachara.

Of the injured, two were sent to Dhaka for treatment. And the rest, with 60-90 percent burns, are currently being treated at CMCH and their condition is not so good, the CMCH director added.