

US wants more durable houses for Rohingyas

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The US wants semi-durable houses for the Rohingyas and allowing them income-generating activities in Cox's Bazar as part of the policy to cut cost for the refugees.

Janine Wynne, deputy assistant secretary of State of the Bureau of Population, Refugee and Migration offered the idea during a meeting with acting Foreign Secretary Rear Admiral (ret'd) Khurshed Alam and foreign ministry's Director General (Myanmar) Mia Md Mainul Kabir at the ministry yesterday.

They discussed the challenges faced by the Rohingyas as well as Bangladesh as the humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya is declining because of global challenges elsewhere.

As of August this year, the funding for the Rohingyas was only 30 percent of the required \$875 million. Early this year, food ration has also been slashed from \$12 a month to \$8 per month for each Rohingya.

A foreign ministry official told this correspondent that the UN has developed a plastic-made semi-durable model house.

"Wynne said that type of housing could be cost-effective. We agreed to the spirit of the proposal, but said that the use of plastic would be hazardous for the environment. Then she said we can be creative in how we do that," he said.

On the issue of involving the Rohingyas in income-generating activities, the official said, Bangladesh government would not agree to that.

Janine Wynne said that the US has been the largest donor for the Rohingyas' humanitarian assistance and will continue to provide the support.

"We said we want Rohingya repatriation because that is the ultimate solution. She said the repatriation should be sustainable," the foreign ministry official said.

Afghan embassy in India suspends operations

AFP, New Delhi

Afghanistan's embassy in India suspended operations yesterday, more than two years after the Taliban's return to power in Kabul following the collapse of the Western-backed government.

Most foreign nations -- including India -- do not officially recognise Afghanistan's Taliban government, but acknowledge them as the de facto ruling authority.



PHOTO: COURTESY

Advocating for children with DOWN SYNDROME

AYMAN ANIKA

Rafan Razzak was born with Down syndrome. Soon after his birth, little Rafan suffered from breathing difficulties, and later, through the karyotyping test, he was diagnosed with Down syndrome.

Though Rafan's parents felt unnerved, they didn't lose hope. Hence, Sarder A Razzak and Shahanaj Parven Chowdhury founded the Down Syndrome Society of Bangladesh (DSSB) in 2010, aiming to empower individuals with Down syndrome, along with their families.

DSSB has been established as a Down Syndrome Resource Centre in Banasree, Dhaka. Often misunderstood and stigmatised, children with Down syndrome face unique challenges that DSSB intends to address.

Chairman of DSSB, Sarder A Razzak has been working to raise awareness about Down syndrome so that children diagnosed with this genetic disorder can reach their full potential. "Early intervention is key and can lead to better developmental outcomes," asserts Sarder, who was able to identify his son's condition at an early stage.

"Children with Down syndrome require special care and support, and their families face overwhelming challenges. So, we founded this platform for parents to connect, share their experiences, and find comfort in knowing they are not alone in their journey," he elaborates.

Shahanaj Parven Chowdhury, director and co-founder, recalls, "When I first held Rafan, he looked like a Japanese doll to me. He was feeble, but a child specialist assured me that he could go on to live a happy and long life."

She explains, "Babies born with Down



syndrome require love and attention, just like every other healthy child. They can become strong individuals if we offer them proper care."

DSSB is actively engaged in raising awareness about this condition. The organisation hosts events, workshops, and campaigns to educate the public and break down misconceptions -- for example, the World Down Syndrome Day, which they have been observing on March 21 since 2014.

Education is a fundamental right for all children, including ones diagnosed with Down syndrome. DSSB has an inclusive learning environment where children with Down syndrome can thrive alongside their peers. Additionally, they offer counselling for parents to better understand the needs of these children.

According to Shahanaj, children with Down syndrome need regular exercise, as remaining physically active can help improve their cardiovascular health and muscle strength. Therefore,

DSSB has arranged Zumba classes that the children find exceedingly enjoyable.

Physical classes are held three days a week at DSSB in Banasree -- Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday -- where children attend fitness and Zumba classes with music, dance, art, and computer lessons. Online classes are also being arranged, where children from different districts can join.

The organisation is committed to celebrating the unique talents and abilities of individuals with Down syndrome. Children get to show their skills and creativity in different places -- namely in Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka, where they mesmerised everyone with their dance performance recently.

DSSB offers a self-advocacy programme for individuals aged 18 to 35, and through this program, they learn to empower themselves -- for example, how to perform different official tasks so that they eventually get employed.

Four such individuals with Down syndrome are already working in DSSB, and Sarder hopes many more will join soon!

Rafan Razzak is now 15, creates vlogs and edits his own videos. He is enjoying life as a healthy person. Similar to Rafan, if children with Down syndrome receive proper care and treatment, they can reach their full potential and make a meaningful contribution to society.



No cheer from export and remittance

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for dollars, so when you fix the official dollar rate at Tk 110 -- when the unofficial rate is Tk 118 -- you won't get dollar at that rate," said Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office.

Remittance is falling due to policy weakness of the central bank, said Salehuddin Ahmed, a former BB governor.

"You are fuelling expectations by raising the rate by 50 paisa to Tk 1 frequently. Only if the central bank can convey that it will allow the market fundamentals to work would the exchange rate stabilise. It is quite difficult to quash prolonged expectations," Razzaque said.

In the monetary policy announced in July, there was a commitment to shift to a market-based exchange rate in September. But that has not happened.

Subsequently, Hussain recommended treating the BAFEDA-set exchange rate as a guideline while allowing all to negotiate the best rate for themselves. In that way, the exchange rate premium will narrow down.

"There has been no big change in conditions in September for remittance to drop so much from August. The only difference is strict enforcement of the BAFEDA rate," he added.

This has diverted remittance to the unofficial channel, also known as hundi.

The authorities need to tackle the unofficial channel from both the demand and supply sides with expediency, said Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, while citing Pakistan's success in this matter as a case in point.

"As long as you don't touch hundi, nothing will work," said Syed Mahbubur Rahman, the managing director and chief executive officer of Mutual Trust Bank.

The demand for hundi has increased too for various reasons. One of the reasons is capital flight centring on the polls scheduled for January, and that group is inelastic to the exchange rate.

"We have been increasing the rates, but we are seeing no impact. Even after import curbs, we are in want of dollars for opening letters of credit," said Rahman, also a former chairman of ABB.

Hussain of the WB said: "This is like a cat-and-mouse game."



SOURCE: EPB

Export, though, is providing some source of solace, at least on paper.

September's receipts take the total received in the first quarter of the fiscal year to \$13.7 billion, up 9.5 percent year-on-year but still fell short of the periodic target by about \$300 million.

Garment, the main export earner, raked in \$3.6 billion, up 12.5 percent year-on-year.

The brands and retailers are paying higher unit prices for Bangladesh's garment products in keeping with the higher prices of raw materials, said Faruque Hassan, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

The garment makers are also sending more and more value-added high-end garment items that fetch more money, he added.

Shipments of leather and leather goods, another big export earner, raked

\$72.7 million in September, down 30.6 percent year-on-year.

"Leather and leather goods are non-essential items and this is why the consumers are buying less of them during this period of economic volatility," said Md. Saiful Islam, former president of Leathergoods and Footwear Manufacturers & Exporters Association of Bangladesh.

The traditional big earner jute and jute goods fetched \$81.4 million last month, down 8.6 percent year-on-year.

Bangladesh mainly focuses on jute sacks and jute yarn and demand for those has fallen worldwide, said Md. Abul Hossain, president of the Bangladesh Jute Mills Association.

Home textile exports brought home \$64.4 million, down 24.2 percent year-on-year, as gas price hikes ate into the local manufacturers' competitiveness in the global market.

Khaleda can't go abroad

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Asked whether there was any way for Khaleda to go abroad, he said it can be done only if the order by which she was released from jail is cancelled.

Given the circumstances, it will be inhuman to reconsider her release order, he said, therefore, the order will not be rescinded.

BNP's Law Secretary Kayser Kamal in a statement said the government could release Khaleda with an executive decision under section 401 of the CrPc.

"An unelected and vindictive prime minister has made this decision. There are instances of sending prisoners abroad for treatment under domestic and international laws. This decision is one of the worst hypocrisies," said the statement.

BCB goes mum

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Media communications yesterday when asked for permission to interview a BCB coach who is not directly involved with the World Cup squad.

A BCB director, on condition of anonymity, discussed the development with this newspaper, saying: "Yes, certain restrictions are in place. We have also internally discussed this thing."

Back in the 2021 T20 World Cup in UAE, Bangladesh's campaign unraveled when BCB president Nazmul Hassan's public remarks over players' performances reportedly impacted dressing room environment.

During the 2022 T20 World Cup in Australia, there were reports of skipper Shakib asking team management to refrain from communicating to the media. However, with things much more desperate now, just keeping mum may not be a course of action that may bring results. The secrecy has, in the past, resulted in sweeping aside problems under the rug.

The Bangladesh team can only hope that they begin the World Cup as a unit, with no further controversies created by members of the BCB.

More into self-praise

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president's speech. Of the time, 156.28 hours were allocated to the ruling party MPs.

The ruling party MPs spent 19.8 percent time praising the prime minister and their own party, and 19.4 percent time on various achievements of the government. They spent 6.7 percent time discussing Bangabandhu and the Mujib Borsho celebration, and 0.4 percent time (2.97 hours) talking about corruption.

The prime minister's question-answer session lasted over 13 hours. Nearly half of that time was spent to talk about matters outside the question, such as praising the prime minister and blasting opposition parties.

Iftekharuzzaman said although legislative activities are one of the most important roles of lawmakers, in many cases they show little interest, or have the required skills and knowledge, to deliberate laws.

The 10th parliament spent 12 percent of the time on legislative affairs; it was 8 percent in the previous parliament.

Despite an increase in the average time spent on law enactment, there was a lack of spontaneous participation and constructive debates. Majority of the ruling party MPs limited their participation to voting for the bills, said the report.

The three standing committees on Rules of Procedure, Privileges and Petitions did not hold any meeting yet, while some other committees did not sit for months on end.

For example, the Standing Committee on the Ministry of Finance did not hold a single meeting in 18 months since March 2020. The House committee on the Health and Family Welfare did not sit even once for the first nine months of the 11th parliament.

The standing committee on public accounts held 117 meetings, the highest, although it failed to hold the mandatory meeting every month, said TIB officials.

Pregnant woman beaten to death

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A pregnant woman, who was beaten up allegedly by her husband in Mymensingh's Gafargaon, died at a hospital yesterday morning.

Marzina Akter Taslima, 33, a mother of two, was the wife of Shafiq Mia of Bagua village, said police.

Quoting the family, Faruq Ahmed, OC of Gafargaon Police Station, said Shafiq had an altercation with Taslima over a trivial matter around 10:00pm on Saturday.

At one stage, Shafiq hit Taslima with a wooden object, injuring him critically. But she was kept untreated till yesterday morning.

Taslima was taken to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital around 9:00am where doctors declared her dead.

Police held Shafiq for interrogation, said the OC.

Schoolteacher dies in road crash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jamalpur

A schoolteacher was killed after being hit by a battery-run auto-rickshaw in Jamalpur's Bakshiganj upazila yesterday afternoon.

Rebecca Sultana Rikta, 36, was a teacher of Char Kalipur Government Primary School in the upazila, said police.

The incident took place in front of Madarerchar Government Primary School on Bakshiganj-Dewanganj road, said Sohel Rana, OC of Bakshiganj Police Station, quoting locals.

Rikta was returning home from her school.

She was rushed to Dewanganj Upazila Health Complex where doctors declared her dead, the OC added.

Slit-throat body of a man found

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

Police recovered the slit-throat body of a battery-powered rickshaw driver at Konabari of Gazipur city early yesterday.

The victim, Aminul Islam, 30, is the son of Saha Ali of Jordbaria village in Mymensingh.

SI Liton Miah, of Konabari Police Station, said criminals killed Aminul near Ambag Ataur Market around 3:00am. Locals found the body and informed the police station, he added.

OC KM Ashraf Uddin said they could not immediately identify the reason behind the murder.

Myanmar begins pilot census in 20 townships

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta announced yesterday it had begun a pilot census in 20 townships across the divided country, a move critics say will be used to increase surveillance of opponents.

The military has justified its 2021 coup with unsubstantiated claims of widespread fraud in 2020 elections won resoundingly by civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

Junta officials have said a national census must be completed before fresh elections, which the government has hinted may come in 2025.

On average, 60 percent of the members were present in the meetings. Analysis of 26 standing committee reports shows 51 percent of its recommendations were implemented.

A total of 54.38 hours, or 14 minutes per working day, were lost due to quorum crisis. In the process, Tk 89.28 crore, or Tk 2.72 lakh per minute, were lost for nothing, the report said.

The average attendance was 55 percent in the 11th parliament, down from 63 percent in the 10th parliament. The opposition leader's attendance was 19 percent, which was 59 percent in the previous parliament.

The House leader's attendance was 94 percent in the current parliament, up from 82 percent in the last parliament.

In its recommendation, TIB said the House should pass a bill on the code of conduct for lawmakers on their behaviour. It also urged the Speaker to take strong measures to stop the use of abusive and unparliamentarily words in the House.

Australia fires force evacuations as country swelters

AFP, Sydney

Out-of-control bushfires forced hundreds of residents and tourists to flee several towns in rural southeast Australia yesterday, as the country sweltered in extreme temperatures.

People in four towns in Victoria state's Gippsland, a region of national parks and wineries popular with tourists, were told to evacuate immediately while residents of three other towns and surrounding areas were warned to prepare to leave.

Among those who escaped was Briagolong resident Rob Saunders, who saw the flames reach his house.

"I watched the main water tank, the plastic tanks melt away," he told public broadcaster ABC.