

BANGLADESH-INDIA TIES
Domestic politics should not be a bar
Says Pankaj Saran

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Indo Bangla relations should not be held hostage to domestic politics, former Indian high commissioner to Bangladesh Pankaj Saran said yesterday.

"If the relationship changes with the changes in government, then it is fragile. If the relationship survives even with the changes in the government, it is mature and sustainable," he said.

He was speaking at the Zahir Hossain Chowdhury Memorial Lecture-2023 on "Bangladesh-India: Role Model of Relation to Neighbouring Country" hosted by the daily Bhoror Kagoj at a city hotel. Bhoror Kagoj Editor Shyamal Dutta moderated the event.

Saran, also convener of Delhi-based think-tank Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues, said there are short-term and long-term strategic aspects of relationship, and that while dealing with short-term goals, they should not lose sight of the long-term strategic issues.

He said Indo-Bangla relation has significantly improved over the last decades as they settled many disputes, including the Tin Bigha Corridor, land and maritime issues, and signed the Ganges water treaty. The cross-border crimes and insurgency were also largely addressed, and those were possible because of the political will from both sides.

Though the two countries have advanced in the areas of trade, economy and sub-regional integration, a number of issues require more focus. Those include poverty and unemployment and water resources management, he added.

Saran said the two countries need to find some innovative solutions to balance trade, which is quite imbalanced today.

He said there should be always readiness to communicate each other directly whenever there are any issues, instead of going to any third party. There will always be some unfinished agenda but both the sides should focus on what they have.

Tariq A Karim, former Bangladesh high commissioner to India, said not only Bangladesh and India, the entire Bay of Bengal countries need to come together to save their coasts and the mangrove forest.

In response to a question regarding the election, Saran said it is the people of Bangladesh and its institutions that will decide how the polls will be held, not anyone else.

Fakhrul, Khasru denied bail again

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Khasru has also been ill.

"Moreover, the charges brought against them are false and fabricated. They were implicated in the case just for political harassment," the lawyer added.

After hearing both sides, the magistrate ordered police to send the two to jail.

Earlier in the day, Fakhrul and Khasru were brought to the court from jail and kept inside the lockup of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's (CMM) Court of Dhaka around 1:00pm, said SI Shahidul Islam, in-charge of the CMM court lockup.

Also yesterday, the High Court directed the CMM Court to accept, hear and dispose of the bail petitions of Fakhrul in nine cases.

The HC also issued a rule, asking the state to explain why the CMM Court's refusal to accept and hear his bail petitions should not be declared illegal.

BNP, Jamaat in talks over formation

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Another Jamaat insider said there will be one committee in each of the six constituencies in Dhaka south and one committee in each of the nine constituencies in Dhaka north.

These 15 committees will work under the core body, he added.

Another leader in Dhaka North Jamaat's publicity unit said, "The aim of all those committees will be strengthening the ongoing movement and resisting the one-



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

'GOROM GOROM PITHA' ... Pitha, or rice cake, vendors across the country are spending their busiest time of the year as people flock to their roadside stalls for some warm pitha, sweet or savoury with an array of bhorts, during winter. This delicacy is an especially favourite one for all Bangladeshis in the colder months. The photo was taken in the capital's Karwan Bazar yesterday afternoon.

NATIONAL POLLS
JP fields 265 candidates, AL 263

Say EC sources

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

The highest 265 candidates from the Jatiya Party will contest the January 7 polls followed by the ruling Awami League's 263, Election Commission sources said.

Thirty-two AL nominees pulled out of the race as the party left their constituencies for the candidates from the JP, Workers Party of Bangladesh, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), and Jatiya Party (JP-Manju).

According to EC primary data, 1,895 candidates will run in the national election. Of them, 1,512 are nominees from 27 registered political parties, while the remaining 382 are independents.

Seventeen political parties, including the major opposition BNP and its allies, are boycotting the polls, saying that a free and fair election is not possible under the current government.

As many as 133 aspirants from Trinamool BNP, 79 from the

Bangladesh Supreme Party, and 54 from the Bangladesh Nationalist Movement are participating in the election. The three parties have been registered with the Election Commission during the tenure of the incumbent commission.

A total of 39 candidates from Islami Front Bangladesh, 42 from Islami Oikya Jote, 29 from Krishak Shramik Janata League, nine from Gonoforum, 21 each from Gano Front and Zaker Party, 13 from Jatiya Party (JP-Manju), 64 from JSD, 122 from National People's Party, 10 from Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh, and 37 from Bangladesh Islamic Front are contesting the polls.

Also, 95 candidates from Bangladesh Congress, 16 from Bangladesh Kalyan Party, 11 from Bangladesh Khelafat Andolan, five from Bangladesh Jaitiya Party (BJP), 38 from Bangladesh Tarikat Federation, five from Bangladesh National Awami Party (NAP), four

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PTI'S VIRTUAL RALLY
Imran uses AI-crafted speech to lure votes

REUTERS, Islamabad



Pakistan's jailed former prime minister, Imran Khan, whose party isn't allowed to hold public rallies, used an audio clip generated by artificial intelligence (AI) late Sunday to address a virtual rally in the first event of its kind in the country.

The audio clip, marred by internet disruptions, was played over the AI-generated image which appears to be speaking, during a virtual rally of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. It drew more than 1.4 million views on YouTube and was attended live by tens of thousands on other social media platforms.

"Our party is not allowed to hold public rallies," Khan said in the clip, urging supporters to turn out in large numbers at general elections set for February 8. "Our people are being kidnapped and their families are being harassed."

The disruptions to livestreaming fuelled transparency concerns about the upcoming elections, with users nationwide complaining of slow internet speeds and throttling, a technique telecoms regulators use to choke streaming on apps.

Pakistan's telecoms regulator said the interruptions were being investigated, but that internet accessibility overall appeared to be normal.

AL leader hacked to death in Cumilla

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

A local Awami League leader was hacked to death in Titas upazila of Cumilla yesterday. Mostafa Kamal Munshi, 40, was a ward unit AL general secretary in Narandia union of the upazila, confirmed AL's candidate for Cumilla 1 Abdus Sabur. Titas Police Station Inspector (Investigation) Ruhul Amin said the murder took place in a char area only accessible by boats at Noyarchar village around 5:00pm.

Police suspect that Munshi was killed by a political rival over an internal conflict.

Without providing additional details, the police official said there were several cases, including that of robbery, against both the perpetrator and the victim.

Tourist vehicle shot at in Khagrachhari

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangamati

A tourist vehicle was shot at on the Dighinala-Sajek road in the Shuknachhari area of Khagrachhari yesterday during the UPDF-called blockade in protest of the December 11 killings of four indigenous people in Panchchari upazila.

Three vehicles—a human haulier, a pickup, and a private car carrying tourists—were vandalised at the same place.

Dighinala Police Station OC Nurul Haque said unidentified criminals fired one round of bullet targeting a tourist vehicle, but no one was hurt in the incident that occurred around 11:30am.

Informed, a team of the Bangladesh Army and police rushed to the spot, and the vehicle along with tourists was escorted to the army's Baghiahat camp.

Due to the blockade, there was very little traffic, and no buses left the district.

Earlier on December 11, four members of the indigenous community were killed in the Panchchari upazila of the district.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts-based regional organisation, United People's Democratic Front, claimed the victims to be its members and alleged they were shot dead by rivals and have been protesting through different programmes.

Man held with firearm in Rajshahi

BSS, Rajshahi

Rab detained an alleged firearm trader along with a foreign-made pistol in his possession in Rajshahi city early yesterday.

Arif Islam, 32, of Yousufpur Kandipara village under this district's Charkhat upazila, was detained for his long term involvement in the trading of firearms and drugs.

Acting on a tip-off, a team of the elite force conducted a drive in the Chalk Kapasia area under Katakhat Police Station Station around 1:30am and apprehended him.

The team recovered a foreign-made pistol, two rounds of bullets and a magazine from his possession.

A case was filed with the police station concerned in this connection, and the detainee, along with the seized item, was handed over to the police, Rab sources said.

14 banks face record capital shortfall

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The four banks are Bengal Commercial Bank, Citizens Bank and the local operations of Pakistan's Habib Bank and National Bank of Pakistan.

Bengal Commercial Bank posted a capital shortfall of Tk 70.70 crore in September. It was Tk 87.93 crore in June.

Citizens Bank had a capital shortfall of Tk 95.37 crore, down from Tk 97.10 crore three months ago.

Both banks blamed the new central bank requirement of a minimum paid-up capital of Tk 500 crore, instead of Tk 400 crore previously, for the shortage.

A senior official of Bengal Commercial Bank says it would not have faced any shortfall had the capital requirement was not raised.

The shortfall at Habib Bank and National Bank of Pakistan was Tk 33.40 crore and Tk 43.65 crore, respectively.

Rupali's fund shortage amounted to Tk 2,121 crore, and it was Tk 2,472 crore for specialised lender Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank.

Agrani's former managing director Mohammad Shamsul Islam said that state-owned banks provide a large number of services to the

Bangladesh Krishi Bank has kept posting the highest capital shortfall as it rose to Tk 15,803 crore from Tk 15,540 crore.

Md Shawkat Ali Khan, managing director of the state run lender, blamed non-performing loans for the shortfall.

"Now we are trying to reduce the volume of our bad loans. Once we are able to cut bad loans, our capital shortfall will decline."

Agrani's capital shortfall rose 28.15 percent to Tk 4,828 crore in the three months till September, while BASIC and Janata Bank's deficit widened to Tk 3,150 crore and Tk 3,029 crore, respectively.

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Agrani's former managing director Mohammad Shamsul Islam said that state-owned banks provide a large number of services to the

general people and the government free of cost.

If the banks claim fees for those services, there would be no capital shortfall."

He suggested that the government and the central bank find a way to meet the shortfall.

In a positive development, Sonali Bank came out of the shortfall zone in the third quarter.

Central bank figures showed that private banks National and Padma's shortfall rose to Tk 2,024 crore and Tk 607 crore, respectively.

The capital deficit at Bangladesh Commerce Bank rose to Tk 1,402 crore. ICB Islamic Bank had a shortfall of Tk 1,823 crore.

Bankers say the growing NPL is one of the major reasons for the capital shortfall at the banks.

In September, the banking sector's NPL stood at Tk 155,397 crore, according to the BB.

Israeli strikes kill 110 in north Gaza

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The Al-Fara camp near Tubas, the ministry said. Rashed Habib al-Aydi, 17, was shot in the chest.

In signs of the wider ramifications of the conflict, a "possible explosion" struck a key shipping lane off Yemen yesterday, two maritime agencies said, the latest incident in the vital waterway threatened by Houthi rebel

attacks.

The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations issued a warning of a potential explosion striking near a vessel passing through the Bab al-Mandeb strait that separates the Arabian Peninsula from the Horn of Africa.

"The captain reported... the

'explosion' occurring two nautical miles off one of the vessel's quarters while it was transiting," said maritime security firm Ambrey.

The incident took place as Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin arrived in Bahrain, home base of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, as part of a Middle East tour that will also take him to Qatar.

Won't comment now

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or discomfort for them, rather it is their responsibility to hold the election.

"But it's true that they [BNP] are an important party. Had they run, it would have been much better."

"We said earlier that if they had taken part, the election could have been more participatory and everyone feels that," he said.

About the declaration by some political parties that they would resist

the polls, the CEC said, "Let's see what happens. If anyone wants to resist the election, it's up to them. This is a political strategy. We are not going to comment on that. We want the election to be peaceful."

About international pressure, Habibul said almost all countries, including Bangladesh's development partners, are enquiring about the polls.

The government is repeatedly saying that the January 7 election

would be free, fair, and credible and the EC is also saying this, he said.

"Like many others, we also hope the next national election will be a credible election. We are emphasising on ensuring free, fair, and peaceful polls."

Earlier, Japanese Ambassador Iwama Kiminori told reporters that his country was planning to send an election observation mission to Bangladesh.

Ballots to reach polling centres

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in this regard.

However, most polling officials will have to be present at the polling centres the day before voting in case the ballots reach the centre, the circular says.

ARMY DEPLOYMENT

Members of the armed forces will be stationed at different "nodal points"

and convenient places in every district, upazila and metropolitan area, an EC letter to the principal staff officer of the Armed Forces Division said yesterday.

The letter said armed forces members will be deployed in coordination with the returning officers.

An executive magistrate will

accompany the armed forces, the letter said.