

Don't want any war in the region, be it real or proxy

Says foreign secretary

UNB, Dhaka

Reiterating Bangladesh's position against wars and conflicts, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen yesterday said any kind of conflict or war in the region might deviate Bangladesh from achieving its goal of further development.

"Obviously, we don't want any war, be it real or proxy war. We are against war," he said, adding that Bangladesh will not allow anyone to use its land to serve others' interests or do anything that might go against the interest of its neighbours.

The foreign secretary made the remarks while responding to a question during a year-ending interaction with the members of Diplomatic Correspondents Association, Bangladesh (DCAB) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. MoFA Spokesperson Sheli Sabrin was also present.

He said Bangladesh is always against any kind of war as common people, women and children suffer from conflicts.

Describing India and Myanmar as Bangladesh's neighbours, he said Bangladesh's focus remains on more development and Bangladesh will get deviated from achieving its target if there is any kind of conflict in the region, proxy or otherwise.

"For this reason, we always exercise maximum restraint," Masud Momen said, noting that there have been provocations when the Rohingya influx began in 2017. "There have been instructions from the top leadership to exercise restraint."

Responding to a question big powers rivalry, the foreign secretary said Bangladesh is trying its best how to do this balancing act maintaining contact and communication with all the countries.

Regarding the next national election, Masud Momen said the government hopes that there will be a good election. "At this moment, we don't think election will not be free and fair."

He hoped that people will cast their votes in the election in a festive mood.



Over 500 people standing in queue as the TCB truck came near the Jatiya Press Club yesterday around noon to sell kitchen essentials at subsidised prices. As the truck seemed to have had commodities enough for around 200 people, many of them said they were afraid they would have to return home empty-handed. With prices of essential soaring in the markets, lines in front of TCB trucks are continuing to get longer.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

BNP extends 'boycott polls campaign' till tomorrow

Rizvi says people have right to abstain from polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP will continue with its leaflet distribution and countrywide mass contact programmes today and tomorrow to garner public support for boycotting the January 7 national election.

Party's Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi announced this at a virtual press briefing yesterday afternoon.

The BNP extended the mass contact and leaflet distribution programmes, which were scheduled to end yesterday, by two more days as part of a non-cooperation movement.

Rizvi said the BNP leaders and activists were arrested and suffered

oppression during the party's six days of leaflet distribution and mass contact campaign.

Rizvi said, "The people of Bangladesh are united. No one will go to the polling centres. People have the right to not go to the polling centres."

For the EC officials, Rizvi said, "You can complete the election arrangements. You can be happy about that. But voters have the right to participate or abstain from casting votes."

He claimed that law enforcers arrested over 26,751 leaders and activists in 1,094 cases across the country between October 28 and 12:30pm yesterday.

GROWING SECURITY RISKS China urges its nationals to leave north Myanmar

REUTERS, Beijing

China's embassy in Myanmar yesterday urged its nationals to leave the Laukkai area in Kokang region in northern Myanmar as soon as possible, citing growing security risks.

Myanmar's military has been battling coordinated rebel attacks in the north in its biggest battlefield challenge since the 2021 coup, worrying neighbouring China.

"The current security situation in Myanmar's Kokang Self-Administered Zone is serious and complex," China foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said at a regular press conference yesterday.

She also urged local authorities to guarantee the safety of Chinese personnel.

4 killed as picnic bus hits lorry

All of them lorry workers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Four people were killed and four others injured when a picnic bus collided head on with a lorry on the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar highway yesterday morning.

The deceased – Ridwan, Bakkar and Zainal of Sajajpara and Mohiuddin of Harbang area, were workers of the lorry, police said.

"They died on the spot when the Cox's Bazar-bound picnic bus from Gazipur and the Chattogram-bound lorry from Chakaria collided in the Kalabagan area of North Harbang on the highway around 7:30pm," Khokon Kanti Rudra, sub-inspector of Chiringa Highway Police outpost, said.

On information, officials of the highway police and Harbang police outpost rushed to the spot and sent the bodies to Chakaria Upazila Health Complex, he added.

Meanwhile, the SI said, the injured bus passengers were shifted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital from the health complex.

The bus driver fled the scene immediately after the accident. "But both the vehicles have been seized," he said.

Hajj registration extended till Jan 18

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government, in a notice issued yesterday, extended the Hajj registration deadline for 2024 until January 18.

It said aspiring Hajis would have to primarily deposit Tk 2.05 lakh, while the rest should be paid by February 29 for final registration.

One has to pay Tk 5,78,840 under the general package, and Tk 9,36,320 under the special package for attending next year's Hajj, likely to be held on June 16 depending on the moon sighting.

On December 21, the ministry had extended the deadline for registration, which began on November 15, till December 31.

The registration server will automatically stop once the registration quota is complete, the notice said.

If any intending devotee fails to perform Hajj, the money deposited for registration will not be returned.

Like this year, 1,27,198 devotees can perform Hajj next year. Of them, 10,198 can perform Hajj under government management while the rest under private management.

The government on November 2 announced the Hajj packages for 2024, after reducing the cost by Tk 92,450.

Lured to India's red light district

FROM PAGE 1

Many Bangladesh sex workers, once victims themselves, now serve as brothel managers, perpetuating the vicious cycle. They employ fellow countrywomen, who later become traffickers responsible for bringing new girls from Bangladesh into the clutches of these brothels.

Pakhi (a pseudonym), a Bangladeshi woman, runs her own brothel.

The outfit is modest by any standards – a rented flat where she guides five girls, earning Tk 12,000 per day through their sex work.

During our multiple visits to this brothel in May this year, we saw that whenever any customers came to a girl, the other girls gave them space and waited outside.

Fifteen years have elapsed since Pakhi, then a young 20-year-old woman from Jashore, left her home with her husband. The path to Budhwar Peth was not of her choosing.

What Pakhi thought was a blissful arranged marriage took a dark turn when she discovered her husband's gambling addiction, which plunged the family into financial turmoil. Her husband suggested they cross the border to Mumbai, where he promised better opportunities awaited. Naively, Pakhi agreed.

"We crossed the border by paying Tk 10,000 to brokers," she recounted of her journey in 2008.

But her husband and the brokers had a different plan, and Pakhi soon found herself sold to a brothel in Pune for two lakh rupees, about Tk 2.67 lakh in today's Bangladeshi currency.

The initial days were fraught with despair, as escape seemed impossible and Pakhi was not paid a single penny during this period, except for some tips from the customers.

"I only received cosmetics and food three a day," said Pakhi, while sharing the experiences. Food was basic meals of lentils, rice, and seasonal vegetables.

Pakhi explains that whenever any girls came to the brothel, they were trained to speak different languages so they could blend seamlessly into the Indian environment, concealing their Bangladeshi identity to avert law enforcers' eyes.

"I can now speak five to six languages – Hindi, Marathi, Karnataka (Kannada), Gujarati, and Bangla," Pakhi says.

Two years later, she had "paid off" her "debt" and was allowed to start receiving payment for the sex work. At the time, she had to pay a percentage to the brothel manager for using the space and security.

Pakhi then had a new dilemma – as a young sex worker stranded by her husband, she was unable to return

home. She had no money and no valid documents. Compelled to stay back, she started a brothel of her own, she says.

She managed four other girls, who were victims of trafficking like herself and subsequently freed from the brothel. "We are now saving money to ensure an identity in India," she says.

Over the years, Pakhi has sent as much as Tk 10 lakh to her parents back home.

THE JOURNEY: VICTIM AT THE BORDER

Only 60 percent of the 4,096 kilometre long Indo-Bangla border is fenced.

The Maheshpur border of Jhenaidah is notorious for its easy passage in and out.

Data from Border Guard Bangladesh's Maheshpur Battalion reflect the vulnerability of this point. Between January 1 and May 15 this year, as many as 75 individuals were apprehended here while attempting to enter India from Bangladesh. There were 22 women and six children among them.

The previous year, this unit apprehended 1,186 people trying to enter India from Bangladesh.

They also arrested 53 traffickers last year, and three more in the first four and a half months of this year.

But it is only a fraction that gets caught, with most walking in and out without detection. It is so easy that on May 15 this year, Joly Khatun, a survivor from Narail, had simply walked back across the border when our correspondents were coincidentally at the border and met her.

Joly was returning home after escaping from a brothel in Mumbai where she had been entrapped for three months.

The girl was trafficked across the same border in the same way, by simply walking across the unmarked, unfenced geopolitical line.

It really is that simple – multiple survivors have told The Daily Star that they were made to walk and were trafficked before they knew it.

The person trafficking Joly was a woman she met while working as a ward assistant at a clinic in Narail. The clinic paid her a meagre monthly salary of Tk 3,000 and the woman offered her a job in India with a lucrative monthly salary of over Tk 10,000.

Joly eagerly followed the woman, boarding a battery-run auto-rickshaw from Muchipol in Narail to Jashore, then a bus to Belemath Bazar in Jhenaidah.

There, they were joined for lunch with two other men. This was actually the house of a carrier. Dozens of people gather in the house and stay until the carrier gives a green signal that the

border is now clean and can be crossed.

After lunch, they were joined by a group of eight to ten other girls and three to four men. In broad daylight, the entourage walked across a deserted area across the border. An hour into walking, Joly came across a railway station.

At the station, Joly found people talking in Hindi and realised that she already left Bangladesh.

As she realised her situation, fear crept in, and Joly's questions were met with threats from the woman.

"Keep quiet or I will hand you over to the police," the woman threatened Joly.

From Kolkata to Mumbai and then Aurangabad by train for the next three days, Joly found herself in a house with 60 to 65 other Bangladeshi women.

Their lives were controlled by an Indian woman.

After three days, the Indian woman informed her that she was sold for 4.5 lakh rupees.

Every girl was given separate rooms. Joly's room had a bed, dressing table, and had a small washroom in the room. They were fed a miserable meal of watery lentils and rice thrice a day.

"They put out cigarette butts on my thigh, my neck, and my back when I refused to agree on their proposal. Then they locked me up in a room and did not give me anything to eat for the next two days," Joly told The Daily Star at the border showing the injury marks on her neck.

"They did not stop even after it. They used to torture with an empty stomach, so, I had to agree on their proposal," added Joly.

Amidst the darkness, Joly found solace in a Bangladeshi girl, whom she affectionately called her sister.

It was through her newfound ally that Joly reconnected with her mother and hatched a plan to escape. Joly's mother sold their land and sent Tk 1.95 lakh to the Indian woman holding her captive.

Joly tied a scarf to the rails of her second-floor balcony and climbed down. Her "sister" had prepped her with a cell phone and 1,500 rupees for the journey. Once out, Joly first took an auto-rickshaw to the railway station at Aurangabad and went to Lokmanya Tilak Terminus station in Mumbai. From there, Joly took a train to Kolkata.

The "sister" had fixed a broker ahead of time. Joly met him and he helped her through the rest of the journey to the border.

After crossing the Indian border, two Bangladeshi brokers received her and kept her for a night in their house. When Joly came out of the house in the morning, the Border Guard Bangladesh at the Maheshpur border of Jhenaidah intervened and rescued her.

Javed owns at least 260 properties in the UK

FROM PAGE 1

Properties – all incorporated in the UK between 2010 and 2021.

Of these companies, New Ventures (London) Limited is the oldest – incorporated on July 13, 2010. The land minister is currently the only director, a post he has been holding since July 2021, according to the company filings.

ZTS Properties Ltd was incorporated on February 17, 2016, and once again the minister is the sole director.

He owns a 60 percent stake in Rukhmila Properties, which was incorporated on July 6, 2019, while his wife Rukhmila Zaman owns the rest.

Javed is also the sole director of Aramit Properties incorporated on May 6, 2020; of ZITZ Property Ventures Ltd incorporated on July 30, 2020; and of Sadakat Properties Ltd formed on July 22, 2021.

He is also the only director of Zeba Properties Ltd incorporated on June 21, 2021, and of Zaria Properties LTD incorporated on the same day.

Of these companies, ZTS Properties LTD has most assets – GBP 73.15 million equivalent to Tk 1,025 crore.

This company saw its assets grow by 3.03 million pounds last year and has 2.5 million pounds worth of bank deposits.

ZTS Properties Ltd also owns most flats and homes – 179 of the 260 properties publicly listed on the UK government websites belong to this company.

The eight companies have assets worth Tk 2,423 crore, according to their financial statements filed at the end of the fiscal year 2022.

Together, these companies have Tk 37.6 crore in bank deposits.

Of his 260 properties, 155 are in London and 30 in Liverpool. The rest are scattered across Slough, Salford, Gillingham, Bromley, Camberley, Sheffield, Manchester, Leeds, Wembley, Tunbridge Wells, Dartford, Uxbridge, Stevenage, Sevenoaks, Romford, Islington, Chelmsford, Birmingham, Upminster, Reading, Harrow, Fleet and Barnet.

His most expensive property is the historic Emerson Bainbridge House on Cleveland Street in London, for which GBP 12.65 million or Tk 177.1 crore was paid.

He purchased this property on July 16, 2021, and this is a freehold property – meaning he owns not only the house but also the land.

A large majority of the mortgage deeds drawn up between different lenders and Rukhmila Properties Ltd is signed by one Uthpal Paul, and the address provided is "53 Kalurgat Heavy Industrial Estate, Chattogram" – the same address as that of Aramit Group Ltd's corporate office.

An internet search reveals Paul's LinkedIn profile, where he put his position as Assistant General Manager of Aramit Group.

This newspaper verified Paul's LinkedIn profile photo with his WhatsApp profile photo to verify it is the same person and contacted him over the phone.

The person picking up the phone claimed that he is not the Uthpal we were looking for even though his photo matched.

Contacted, Bangladesh Bank Executive Director and Spokesperson Md Mezbahul Haque said Bangladeshi individuals can acquire assets abroad through two processes. One is through businesses or jobs abroad and the other is through sending funds from Bangladesh with approval from the central bank.

He said it is impossible to comment on a specific individual without knowing how he acquired the wealth abroad.

"This is not the job of Bangladesh Bank to find out who owns assets abroad. It is the job of the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU), and these are two separate bodies," he said.

"I don't know if the BFIU has taken any initiative in this regard."

Asked if the land minister has taken any approval from the central bank, the BB spokesperson said he cannot say anything about it now.

A senior central bank official seeking anonymity said the land minister did not take any approval from the BB to send money abroad.

BFIU chief Md Masud Biswas declined to comment.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), at a press conference on Tuesday, first raised the issue of a minister's business abroad worth over Tk 203 billion.

TIB did not disclose the name of the minister, but the anti-graft body said if any government authorities seek the information, they are ready to provide evidence.

At the press conference, TIB stated that a minister and his wife actively manage six real estate companies abroad, collectively valued at 166.4 million pounds.

TIB raised the issue as the AL candidate did not mention his investments abroad in his affidavit submitted to the Election Commission.

Immediately after TIB's announcement, public curiosity flared about who that minister could be.

MP candidates submit their affidavits to the EC containing eight personal and financial information as the commission made it mandatory following a landmark Supreme Court verdict.

Though the candidates submit their affidavits to the EC, the commission never goes for any scrutiny to authentic their claims.

Affidavits are written statements confirmed by oath, and falsification in them is a punishable offence both

in criminal laws, by up to three years in jail, and in election laws, by up to cancellation of nomination.

According to the ministry website, Javed was chairman of United Commercial Bank. He also served as the chairman and managing director of Aramit Group, a leading commercial group in Bangladesh, chairman of North West Securities Limited and North West Shipping Lines Limited.

National Bank

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spokesperson and Executive Director Md Mezbahul Haque said they had sent the letter to the bank asking it to explain the matter, but a court stayed the effectiveness of the BB's letter for three months.

Alam had taken the loan from the Gulshan branch of NBL and Tk 491 crore is outstanding.

The NBL rescheduled the loan but the central bank on October 23 instructed it to cancel the rescheduling because the BB did not find any business activities of the Marium Construction at the address mentioned in the loan application.

According to the central bank's inspection report, the NBL's client withdrew the loan amount and transferred it to various accounts. The Anti-Corruption Commission is carrying out an investigation into this incident.

Mehmood Husain, managing director and CEO of NBL, told this correspondent on Wednesday that they committed an "unintended error".

Officials of the bank's CIB department erroneously updated the CIB database placing the loan under standard category instead of BL category (on December 3), he said.

The MD said they later updated the CIB report showing the client as a defaulter.

"We learnt that the central bank informed the Election Commission about the defaulter because he is willing to participate in the upcoming national election," Mehmood said.

Following an application by the client, the Supreme Court chamber judge on December 19 directed the EC to allow Alam to run and to allocate a poll symbol for him.

Later, the Awami League candidate for Gazipur-4, Simeen Hussain Rimi, filed a petition with the Appellate Division seeking cancellation of the chamber judge's order.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Alam yesterday said, "I am not a loan defaulter. This is a conspiracy against me by Simeen Hussain Rimi."