

## BGB, BSF to use non-lethal weapons at border

### Says foreign minister

DIPLomatic CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka and Delhi have agreed on the use of non-lethal weapons to stop border killings, Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud said yesterday after his three-day visit to India.

"We have discussed border killings that often take place. He [Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar] agreed on my point that if non-lethal weapons are used, the border killings will stop or will reduce at least," he told reporters at a briefing at the foreign ministry.

"The issue now is figuring out how to put this into practice," he said.

According to Ain o Salish Kendra, a rights body in Bangladesh, deaths along the border areas have marked a gradual increase every year since 2020.

At least 31 people were killed by Indian Border Security Force members in 2023, compared to 24 in 2022 and 18 in 2021.

Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud said he also discussed the Teesta water-sharing deal with his Indian counterpart.

"The central government [of India] has no problem with the Teesta water-sharing deal. The problem comes from the state government," he said.

"As India will hold its national election in April-May, we have decided that we will go over the issue after the election. At the same time, we have also discussed the renewal of 'The Ganges Water Treaty'," he added.

Bangladesh and India failed to sign the Teesta water-sharing agreement due to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's last minute opposition during the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in 2011.

During the visit to Delhi from February 7-9, the first bilateral visit after the election, he held meetings with Indian President Droupadi Murmu, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Foreign Minister Jaishankar, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, and Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal.

The Myanmar crisis was an important discussion with the Indian ministers, and both countries agreed to work together for Myanmar's stability.

"We both share borders with Myanmar. Both of our countries are worried about Myanmar's instability. So, there are many issues to work together on, especially the repatriation of the Rohingya. We always sought India's assistance and did it this time

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Palestinians inspect the site of an Israeli strike on a house in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## One in 5 migratory species at risk of extinction

### Says landmark UN report, blames climate change, human encroachment

REUTERS, Singapore

More than a fifth of the world's migrating species are at risk of going extinct as a result of climate change and human encroachment, according to the United Nations' first-ever report on migrating animals published yesterday.

Billions of animals make journeys across deserts, plains or oceans every year to breed and feed, and "unsustainable" pressures put on migratory species could not only see their populations dwindle, but also disrupt food supplies and threaten livelihoods, the report said.

Of the 1,189 species covered by a 1979 UN convention to protect migratory animals, 44 pc have seen numbers decline, and as many as 22pc could vanish altogether, the report added.

The numbers were based on assessments and data provided by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as well as the Living Planet Index, which collates population numbers for more than 5,000 species from 1970 onwards.

The report, released yesterday, gives "a very clear direction" about what governments need to do to tackle the threats to migratory species, said Amy Fraenkel, executive secretary of the UN Convention on the Conservation of

Migratory Species of Wild Animals.

"It's always about implementation," she said ahead of the convention's meeting, held this week in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

Humans pose the biggest threat, with activities including hunting, fishing and other forms of overexploitation impacting 70pc of the species on the UN list.

**The report's authors urge govts to avoid disrupting habitats and migration paths when installing infrastructure such as dams, pipelines or wind turbines.**

Habitat loss affected up to 75pc of the species — underlining the need for more connectivity between isolated ecosystems. The report's authors urged governments to avoid disrupting habitats and migration paths when installing infrastructure such as dams, pipelines or wind turbines.

"We need to look at the top levels of government decision making," said Fraenkel "and what is being planned so

that we can make sure that we can ... address human needs while not sacrificing the nature we all need to survive."

The pressures are being compounded by temperature changes, which disrupt the timing of migrations, cause heat stress and drive increasingly destructive weather-related events such as drought or forest fires.

"The changes that had been already predicted some years ago are now happening," Fraenkel said.

Parties to the Convention meet every three years to review new species to add to its watch list. Among the animals being considered at this week's Samarkand meeting will be the giant Amazon catfish.

The agency will also launch a new program to provide technical assistance for countries to protect habitats more effectively, Fraenkel said.

Conservationists urged governments to honour their 2022 pledge under the new global biodiversity agreement to set aside 30 percent of the world's land and sea territories for nature by 2030.

"If governments do everything they have committed to do, then the next (UN report) will have some good news," said Susan Lieberman, vice-president of international policy at the Wildlife Conservation Society, who is attending the Samarkand meeting.

## AL candidate wins in Naogaon-2

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Awami League's candidate unofficially won the election to Naogaon-2 constituency (Patnitola and Dhamoirhat) yesterday, bringing the total number of AL seats in the current parliament to 224 out of 300.

AL candidate Md Shahiduzzaman Sarkar bagged 1,18,941 votes with the "boat" symbol, while independent candidate HM Akhtarul Alam was his closest competitor with 74,381 votes under "truck" symbol, according to the results announced by Md Golam Mowla, Naogaon deputy commissioner and also the returning officer.

On December 29, the Election Commission postponed the 12th national elections to the Naogaon-2 constituency hours after independent candidate Aminul Haq, a former Awami League leader in Naogaon, died while undergoing treatment at a hospital in the capital.

Later, the EC rescheduled the polls for yesterday.

## Rohingya 'spy' shot dead at Ukhiya camp

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

A Rohingya man was shot dead by criminals at a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar's Ukhiya upazila on Sunday night.

Asadullah, 35, a differently-abled person was a resident of Camp 20 in the upazila.

"He reportedly worked as a spy for a criminal gang. It is primarily assumed that he was found out and the rival criminal gang killed him for it," said Md Arefin Jewel, deputy commander of Armed Police Battalion (APBn-14).

A group of 10 to 15 people picked him up from his residence near Lal Pahar area inside the refugee camp at around 11:00pm.

The criminals took Asadullah to the Notun Bridge area and shot him to death before fleeing the scene.

On information, APBn members rushed to the spot and informed the local police station.

## 30 robbers held with arms, loots in the Bay

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Rab said yesterday that its members detained 30 robbers during overnight drives in the Bay of Bengal.

During the drives, Rab also seized illegal firearms and ammunition, along with two engine-run trawlers, from their possession, Rab-7 Commanding Officer Lt Col Mahub Alam said at a press briefing in Chattogram's Patenga.

"We had information that a large group of robbers were preparing to loot 15 to 20 fishing trawlers. So, we conducted drives on the southwestern part of the deep sea and tracked them down.

"We successfully apprehended 30 robbers on two trawlers with fish and other valuables looted from fishermen."

The detainees will be sued and handed over to the police, the CO added.

In recent times, there have been multiple armed robberies on fishing trawlers and small vessels in the Bay of Bengal.

## Rail bogged down by six projects

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Actually, the BR is not interested in continuing the project," said a top BR official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly on the issue.

Md. Quamrul Ahsan, the director general of BR, however, said the negotiation committee is working to revive the project.

The other project with funding uncertainty is the one taken up in October 2016 to procure 200 rail carriages with money arranged by a Chinese contractor.

In August 2022, the railway authorities decided to cancel the contract with the Chinese company following a government committee's objection to the hard terms of the loan.

New financing is yet to be arranged and the authorities fear the project could be cancelled.

BR is unable to launch new trains or enhance the capacity of existing trains in its east zone due to the carriage shortage.

Citing an example an official said Cox's Bazar should be served with five express trains but it has only two as there are no carriages.

The Tk 14,250.61 crore project to turn the 174-km Joydebpur Ishwardi section into a dual-gauge double line has been delayed after China in early 2021 decided to pull out from funding due to "lack of in-depth preliminary work and insufficient feasibility study".

The move came months after the same PMO committee asked the BR to slash Tk 1,495.52 crore (12.91 percent) from the project's contract price of Tk 11,586.68 crore.

The project was taken in November 2018 with the view to improving the line capacity that connects the capital with the north-western destinations.

Against the backdrop, the BR turned to Japan to implement the project and Japan agreed.

Currently, the BR has started the tendering process for hiring consultants for detailed design, Ahsan said.

The project, which was scheduled to be completed by December 2024, may

not be completed by 2028, according to BR officials. Train to and from the north have to wait at stations to give way to other trains as line between Joydebpur and Ishwardi is single track.

In January 2015, the BR took a project to build a second line on the Dhaka-Narayanganj route to increase the existing capacity of 16 pairs of trains daily. The project's original deadline was June 2017.

When the project was 82 percent complete, the contractor laying the rail line, the Power Construction Corporation of China, on March 15 last year cancelled the contract alleging that it was not getting payments and the project site was not handed on time.

In the meantime, the project cost soared 73.9 percent to Tk 658.34 crore and the deadline was extended to June 2026.

The project saw no physical progress last year, while the BR has also changed the scope of the works eight years after it was initiated.

Currently, the BR is evaluating the bid proposals for completing the rest of the work, according to Ahsan.

In May 2018, the BR took a project for constructing a rail line from Faridpur's Madhukhali to Magura without conducting a feasibility study.

The Tk 1,202.49 crore project was supposed to wrap up by April 2022, but it saw 45.63 percent progress until December last year. In the last year, the progress was just 5.86 percent.

Now, the project authority is seeking Tk 290 crore more and until June 2026 to complete it, according to BR officials.

The project got delayed due to the lengthy process of land acquisition and the contractor's claim to increase the contract price and change the specification for some materials, according to Ahsan.

"The land-related problems are almost solved and we are working to resolve the other issues," he said.

Another project was taken up in July 2011 for Tk 117.68 crore to rehabilitate the Kulaura-Shahbazpur section of the railway with the view to establishing connectivity between India and Bangladesh.

The project, which was supposed to be complete by December 2012, saw only 27.50 percent progress in the last twelve-and-a-half years, while its cost rose more than five times to Tk 678.50 crore.

There were some problems on the side of the Indian contractor but they have resumed the works, Ahsan said.

"Like many other sectors, the BR lacks good governance and accountability and thus none is held responsible for project delays, which further encourage the malpractices," said Md. Shamsul Hoque, a professor at Buet's Department of Civil Engineering.

While the BR has a master plan, its projects are not taken up in accordance due to failure to get funding as per the plan.

"But the BR does not have the capability or even the interest to update the plan in a pragmatic way," Hoque added.

The BR, however, blames the uncertainty over foreign funding, complexities in land acquisition and lack of necessary manpower for the delays.

"We are working to resolve the problems tirelessly and move forward with the projects," Ahsan said.

## She was raped

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said he was informed of the incident over the phone by one of the neighbours. "I rushed to my home and took my wife to the hospital around 6:00am.

"There were multiple injury marks on her body. Her ears were bleeding as the criminals ripped off her gold earrings."

Contacted, KMCH Resident Medical Officer (RMO) Dr Suman Roy said, "We have found several injury marks on her body. She also had glue on her eyes and mouth."

Paikgachha Police Station Officer-in-Charge (OC) Obaidur Rahman said police were investigating the incident.

However, no case was filed till filing the report last night at around 8:00pm.

## Tunisia coast guards search for 17 migrants missing at sea

AFP, TUNIS

Seventeen Tunisian migrants are missing a week after embarking from a Mediterranean port city in the country's north, Tunisia's coast guard said yesterday, after relatives had urged the authorities to find them.

"Search operations continue to find 17 missing migrants who left the coast of Bizerte last Monday," National Guard spokesman Houssein Eddine Jebabli told AFP.

The group includes at least one minor travelling with his father and one woman, Jebabli said, noting they are all Tunisian nationals.

Tunisia as well as neighbouring Libya have become the main departure

points for irregular migrants, often from other countries, who risk perilous sea journeys in the hopes of reaching better lives in Europe.

The families of the 17 missing Tunisians demonstrated on Saturday in central Bizerte, calling on the authorities to find their loved ones, according to local media.

The bodies of 13 Sudanese migrants who had left from Tunisia's Sfax were recently found, a court spokesman in the coastal city of Monastir said on Thursday, with 27 other people who had sailed with them still missing.

During the first 11 months of 2023, Tunisian authorities intercepted 69,963 irregular migrants, according

to the National Guard -- more than double the figure for the same period in 2022.

Some 2,498 people died or went missing while attempting to cross the central Mediterranean in 2023, a 75-percent increase on the previous year, according to the UN's International Organization for Migration.

Tunisia's worsening economy, with a 1.2-percent growth estimate by the World Bank for 2023 and unemployment at 38 percent, has pushed more migrants to seek better opportunities across the Mediterranean.

Political tensions have also impacted Tunisians since a 2021 power grab by President Kais Saied.

## Defaulted loans soar 20.7pc

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2026 by implementing the roadmap. The state banks' defaulted loans will be less than 10 percent and that of private banks will be under 5 percent.

The bad loan situation at the six state-run commercial banks is more alarming: at Tk 65,781.43 crore, defaulted loans now account for 20.99 percent of their disbursed loans.

Bad loans account for 5.93 percent of the 43 private commercial banks' total disbursed loans after the

volume rose by Tk 14,543 crore to Tk 70,981.86 crore last year.

However, the defaulted loans at nine foreign banks rose by only Tk 153 crore to Tk 3,200 crore. The bad loans at the three specialised banks rose by Tk 960 crore to Tk 5,669.13 crore at the end of last year, BB data showed.

The discipline in the banking sector will be restored through the roadmap, said Selim RF Hussain, the MD of BRAC Bank and the chairman of ABB.

The actual volume of defaulted loans is upwards of Tk 400,000 crore if the Tk 250,000 crore loans that are pending against the cases in court and the Tk 65,000 crore loans written off are factored in, said Moinul Islam, economist and former professor of the University of Chittagong.

"It is very difficult to bring down the bad loans without any political commitment," he said, while urging the government to take punitive action against the defaulters.

## Coast Guard, BGB on alert

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the border yesterday morning. According to him, the ongoing fighting may create a situation where vulnerable Rohingyas and other Myanmar nationals may attempt to seek shelter in Bangladesh.

However, situation along Tumbru

and Ghumdhum in Naikhonchhari upazila of Bandarban, and Rahamater Beel in Ukhiya upazila, and Lamba Beel, Whykong, and Hnila in Teknaf of Cox's Bazar was relatively calm yesterday.

Meanwhile, the education ministry has decided not to use

Ghumdhum High School as an SSC examination centre in the wake of the fighting. The process to shift this centre is underway and it will be completed soon as the exam starts on Thursday, said Chattogram Divisional Commissioner Tofail.