

INDIAN OCEAN Bangladesh to become full member of security group

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh will become a full member of the Colombo Security Conclave, a regional security group in the Indian Ocean.

"We have so far been observer of the Colombo Security Conclave. Recently, we have decided that we will participate in the conclave as a member in the future," Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen told reporters after he met Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra at the state guest house Jamuna on Thursday.

The CSC, which was formed in 2011 as a trilateral Indian Ocean maritime security group of India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, came to a standstill after 2014 due to rising tensions between India and the Maldives.

In 2020, India pushed for the revival and institutionalisation of the organisation and expressed interest in expanding the CSC to Mauritius, Seychelles, and Bangladesh, according to an article by the Indian think tank Observer Research Foundation.

Asked about the implications of Bangladesh's joining the CSC, Dhaka University's International Relations Department Prof Niloy Ranjan Biswas said he sees more opportunities than challenges in it.

He said the objective of the CSC is to cooperate among the countries to address challenges such as narco-trafficking, human trafficking, piracy, terrorism and extremism, and even humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

"The security cooperation as defined in the CSC is broad and wide. It is not limited to defence only. For Bangladesh, maritime safety and security in the context of future risks is very important. It is important for the regional countries to work together to address the security threats," he said.

Even, if some other countries like Australia join the grouping, it would be even better. Such groupings are mini-lateral ways of working more effectively, which is often not possible in big platforms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana pose for a photo on the way to the Awami League office from their village home in Tungipara, Gopalganj, yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: YEASIN KABIR JOY

Cooperatives can boost agri production, alleviate poverty: PM

UNB, Gopalganj

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday stressed the need for cooperatives in every area throughout the country to boost agricultural production, alleviate poverty, and create the scope for micro-savings.

"Our [political] leaders should be sincere to enhance production, alleviate poverty, and make arrangements for micro-savings through cooperatives in every area," she said.

The premier said this while exchanging views with the members of Dariarkul Gram Unnayan Samity, a village-level cooperative society, at Tungipara upazila Awami League office in Gopalganj.

She said her government has been implementing multifaceted programmes to make everybody financially solvent.

The PM briefly highlighted her government's different programmes, including "My House, My Farm", Start-up programme, universal pension scheme, and collateral-free bank loans for self-

employment.

"We have taken many initiatives to improve the living standard of the people by stamping out poverty," she said.

The PM said if the programmes undertaken by her government are implemented properly, nobody will remain poor in the country.

Hasina, who is the adviser of Dariarkul Gram Unnayan Samity, appreciated the initiative of reviving the cooperatives system. She asked the authorities concerned to spread the idea of forming cooperatives across Bangladesh to increase food production and thus make Bangladesh self-reliant.

The cooperative society has been built on 9.05 acres of land donated by Hasina.

In the cooperatives system, the ownership of the land will not be changed, while profits from production of crops on the land will be divided into three parts, the PM said.

Two shares of the profits will be given to the landowners and the farmers. The

remaining share will be given to the cooperatives fund, she added.

The premier reiterated her call to bring every inch of land under cultivation to increase food production to cut dependency on others.

About the pension scheme, she said her government took up the Universal Pension Scheme for a secure future of people.

Hasina, also the ruling Awami League president, urged her party members to join the scheme for the betterment of their future life.

Bangabandhu's youngest daughter Sheikh Rehana was present at the event.

Gopalganj Deputy Commissioner Kazi Mahbulul Alam moderated the view-exchange meeting.

Later, Hasina distributed agricultural equipment and educational materials as well as financial grants among the poor and students.

She paid tribute and offered prayers at the mausoleum of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

2 killed in Sirajganj road accidents

STAR REPORT

At least two people were killed in separate road accidents on local Bogura Nagarbari road in Shahjadpur upazila of Sirajganj last morning.

The deceased are Nargis Khatun, 35, of Tetiarkanda village, and Arshed Pramanik, 60, of Shol Capri village in Shahjadpur upazila.

Hatikumrul Highway Police Station Officer-in-Charge Md Abdul Wadud said Nargis died as a truck hit her while she was crossing the road in Jugnidah area around 10:30am.

Police seized the truck but its driver fled the scene, he said.

Meanwhile, another truck hit a CNG-run autorickshaw in front of Baghabari Gas Pump on the highway around 11:00am.

Arshed Pramanik, a passenger of the autorickshaw, was declared dead at a hospital, OC Wadud said.

The driver of the auto-rickshaw was also injured in the accident, he added.

Meanwhile, in Dinajpur, at least 25 people were injured when a bus carrying them lost control and crashed into a roadside tree on Birampur-Panchbibi road in Hakimpur upazila yesterday afternoon.

Shamim Hossain, a sub-inspector of Hakimpur Police Station, said that the bus was carrying at least 40 people.

18-yr-old stabbed to death in teen gang violence

UNB, Chattogram

An 18-year-old young man was stabbed to death and another injured in an attack carried out allegedly by a teen gang in the Akmal Ali Pocket Gate area under Patenga Police Station in Chattogram on Thursday night.

The victim is Md Mehedi Hasan, of Gorinda Bazar in Bhola's Lalmoohan upazila, who used to live in Chattogram.

The injured Md Rifat, 19, of Side Para under Patenga Police Station is undergoing treatment in critical condition at Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH).

Police and locals said some teenagers blocked Mehedi and Rifat's rickshaw when they were heading towards the main road from the Akmal Ali Pocket Gate area around 8:45pm.

The attackers stabbed them with sharp weapons and fled.

Locals rescued the injured and took them to CMCH where doctors declared Mehedi dead on arrival, said Nurul Alam Asheq, in charge of CMCH police outpost.

Train to roll into new rail bridge in Dec

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The railway bridge would improve the capacity of BR in operating more trains between the capital and western part of the country. It would also help reduce train delays, which are now common, said officials.

The delays in schedule of trains that travel between the capital, north-western and south-western regions mainly occur due to restrictions on load and speed on the Bangabandhu bridge.

With the highest permitted speed of 20kmph, it takes about half an hour for a train to travel from the station on the east side of the bridge to the west, said officials.

This problem cannot be solved until the rail bridge and the dual-gauge double lines between Joydebpur and Ishwardi are constructed, said officials.

There is a single line from Joydebpur to Ishwardi. The railway operates around 40 trains on this stretch that connects Dhaka with the western region via the Bangabandhu bridge a day.

Officials said a maximum of 22 trains could travel smoothly on this route a day, but operation of more trains than the capacity is causing the delays. The new rail bridge will have the capacity to operate 88 trains daily.

Considering all these factors, BR has taken two projects – one for constructing the rail bridge and another for constructing a dual-gauge double line from Joydebpur to Ishwardi, they added.

In December 2016, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council passed the bridge project at a cost of Tk 9,734 crore and the project was scheduled to be completed within December 2023.

But the physical work of the project started in August 2020 and the cost rose to Tk 16,918.59 crore and the deadline was extended to December 2025 with a year defect liability period.

However, the physical work of the Joydebpur-Ishwardi double project is yet to start due to fund-related problems. China, which was supposed to finance the project, pulled out midway. Now, Japan is going to fund it.

It may take two more years to start the physical work, said officials.

'City tolls' now an easy way of extortion

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action late at night when long-haul trucks ply the city roads.

The DSCC, through lessees, collects tolls from city buses (Tk 40 or Tk 60), pickups and human hauliers (Tk 40), and auto-rickshaws (Tk 10). It only charges trucks for parking (Tk 80 or Tk 90).

In reality, excess tolls are being collected and from unauthorised locations too.

Our correspondents saw that Tk 100 was regularly being collected from drivers of pick-ups and trucks.

These collectors seen charging heavily loaded trucks extra toll, even though the lease agreement does not allow them to do so.

Sources in police said at least 60 cases were filed over collecting tolls illegally, and hundreds were arrested in 2023, but the extortion continues.

Mohammad Iqbal Hossain, the deputy commissioner of Wari division police, said there were irregularities in collecting the city corporation toll.

"The collectors often do not return the change if given a Tk 100 note for a Tk 30 or Tk 60 toll. They [the collectors] were even found providing unsigned receipts, and collecting tolls at unauthorised locations," Iqbal told The Daily Star.

Iqbal also said toll collectors were supposed to wear designated uniforms or high-visibility vests, and valid identity cards but they often don't do so.

"Sometimes, they try to use muscle power if the police try to take action," he said.

"But we are taking stern action against these extortionists and have adopted a zero-tolerance policy. At least 15 cases were filed and dozens arrested in less than three months," said Iqbal.

"We may not be able to stop the extortion completely but an awareness was created about this, and we are hopeful that the situation will improve soon," added the DC.

Osman Ali Khan, general secretary of the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation, told The Daily Star, "In the name of collecting city tolls, extortion is going on at 71 locations inside the DSCC area. It is not only creating a long tailback on roads but also chaos in city transport."

The collectors extort drivers just like robbers, he added.

The DSCC database shows that a lease was issued to three firms in January this year to collect tolls from 57 locations around the Sayedabad bus terminal, the Joy Kali Temple in Gulistan, and the truck parking lots at Doyaganj and Dholaikhal.

The firms are Himachal Gold Line, authorised to collect tolls at 35 locations near the bus terminal, its sister company 7-Eleven Enterprise, (authorised to collect tolls at 20 locations near Joy Kali Temple, and Saddam Enterprise, at the truck parking lots.

At least 10 people supposedly of Himachal Gold Line were arrested last year for collecting tolls illegally.

the property wing collects parking fees in different areas of the city corporation.

The lessees have specific conditions, like where they can collect tolls, from which types of vehicles, and how much. Collecting tolls violating the condition is illegal, said the mayor.

"If we receive any complaint in this regard, we inform the police, and they take action. We have a watchful eye on this issue."

Aftab Uddin is the owner of Himachal Gold Line and 7-Eleven Enterprise. He is also the chairman of a company called Himachal Transport.



Locals said 7-Eleven Enterprise collects Tk 100 from vehicles in the Joy Kali Temple area and Saddam Enterprise stops trucks on the road to extort money.

These correspondents visited Sayedabad on an auto-rickshaw on the night of March 30 and saw five people stopping a truck going towards the Sayedabad level crossing. Noticing the press sticker on the auto-rickshaw, the five fled the scene.

On another occasion, the correspondents followed a truck from Swamibagh to Gulistan and managed to talk to the driver, Md Alimur, near the Joy Kali Temple.

Alimur showed a receipt for a Tk 100 parking fee, although he said he did not stop at any parking lot.

DSCC Mayor Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh told The Daily Star, "The DSCC transport wing collects tolls from different vehicle at the bus terminal and its adjacent areas, and

He told The Daily Star, "Police have arrested some people of my company on charges of extortion. But no one in my organisation collects money from trucks."

"We collect city toll from buses, minibuses, and pickups. If anyone extorts in the name of my organisation, I am not responsible for it."

"I have told my collectors not to do anything beyond the terms of the lease. For this, I have also taken their signatures on a Tk 100 stamp. I have also filed five general diaries against those extorting using the name of my organisation."

Sources said Aftab appointed six people to supervise the collection of tolls. He also has a written agreement with them.

This paper could not find Saddam Enterprise officials for comments. The phone number mentioned in its contract with the DSCC was found switched off.

High levels of cancer-causing elements found

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across the world says Dhaka is the only place where combined carcinogenic risk "exceeds the benchmark for both adults and children".

The study titled "Elemental Characterization of Ambient Particulate Matter for a Globally Distributed Monitoring Network: Methodology and Implications" was published in the peer-reviewed journal ACS ES&T Air on March 10.

The Surface Particulate Matter Network, the only global monitoring network that measures fine particulate concentrations, collected the data to identify regions with elevated chemical elements.

Researchers studied the elemental composition of particulate matter samples between 2019 and 2023 to understand the distribution of dust and chemical elements, assess health impacts, and investigate emission sources.

According to Prof Abdus Salam, one of the researchers, lead pollution in Bangladesh is causing the presence of alarming levels of lead in the air.

"Lead concentration used to be high once. Then it declined, and we usually got 400 to 500 nanograms per cubic metre of air. But nowadays we get over 1,000 nanograms," says Prof Salam, who teaches chemistry at Dhaka University.

The study finds Dhaka air as the most hazardous followed by those of Kanpur (India), Hanoi, Singapore, Beijing, and Kaohsiung (Taiwan).

The findings will allow researchers to perform more accurate health risk assessments and thorough investigation into emission sources, said Prof Salam.

According to a Unicef and Pure Earth report, around 1 in 3 children – almost 800 million globally – have blood lead levels at or above 5 micrograms per deciliter (µg/dL), the level which requires action.

It is estimated that 35.5 million children in Bangladesh are affected with blood lead levels above 5 µg/dL, making the country the fourth most seriously hit in the world in terms of the number of children affected.

While dust originates from natural sources like deserts and human activities like construction and agriculture, chemical elements like lead and arsenic are predominantly emitted by human activities like fossil fuel combustion and industrial processes.

The number of cancer patients is steadily increasing in Bangladesh,

and in the year 2050, the country may record more than double the new cases of 2022, according to a WHO report published early this year. In Bangladesh lung cancer is one of the most common forms of cancer.

Contacted, Environment, Forest and Climate Change Minister Saber Hossain Chowdhury said, "We take

ELEMENTS	IN DHAKA	WHO STANDARD
LEAD	1,100	500
ARSENIC	32	6.6
CADMIUM	18	5

(IN NANOGRAM PER CUBIC METER)

note of peer-reviewed research findings. These are findings that need to be looked at closely. We are aware that e-waste from battery-powered three-wheeler rickshaws requires particular attention. We will keep the findings in mind when we formulate our responses."

The link between environmental degradation and public health cannot be overlooked, he added.

Country to see

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Every year, the monsoon season typically arrives in Bangladesh between June 7 and 15. BMD's long-term forecast for May indicates a normal amount of rainfall, an improvement over last month, which saw 81 percent less rain than the average.

Bangladesh experienced a record-breaking 23 heatwave days in April, the highest in 76 years.

On a brighter note, the Met office forecasts rain and thunderstorms over the next three days in several areas across five divisions, including Dhaka.

"Rain or thundershowers accompanied by temporary gusty or squally wind is likely to occur at many places over Dhaka, Mymensingh, Khulna, Barishal, and

Sylhet divisions and at a few places over Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Chattogram divisions with hails at isolated places," said a Met office forecast for the

next 72 hours commencing at 9:00am yesterday.

Yesterday, the highest temperature recorded was 34.8 degrees Celsius in Jashore, while the lowest was 21.5 degrees Celsius in Faridpur and Rangpur.