

TEESTA RIVER MANAGEMENT Govt mulling feasibility study to secure Chinese loan

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina informed the parliament on Wednesday that the government is considering a proposal for a detailed feasibility study for the implementation of the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project.

To implement the Tk 821 billion project, the government prepared a Preliminary Development Project Proposal (PDPP) and submitted it to the Economic Relations Division (ERD) to secure foreign funding, Hasina, also leader of the House, said in response to a question from Kurigram-2 MP Md Hamidul Haque Khandker.

“At the 51st meeting of an ERD committee, which is responsible for mobilising foreign funds, it was

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People wading through ankle-deep water at the outdoor department of Osmani Medical College Hospital in Sylhet city yesterday. Incessant rains since Wednesday night have left the hospital, along with many other areas, waterlogged, disrupting services and causing immense sufferings to the patients, attendants and doctors.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

RMG worker stabbed to death by muggers

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

A garment worker was stabbed to death by muggers in Gazipur's Konabari area Wednesday night.

The deceased, Ruby Khatun, 22, was a junior operator in the trimming section of Shanon Sweater Limited, said Roknuzzaman Sarkar, sub-inspector (SI) of Konabari Police Station.

Quoting witnesses, the SI said the incident occurred around 8:15pm on the Dhaka-Tangail Highway when three muggers on a motorcycle intercepted Ruby on an auto-rickshaw and tried to snatch her phone. When she resisted, they stabbed her and fled the scene.

BURIMARI LAND PORT Trade to remain shut for 7 days

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

The export and import activities through Burimari Land Port in Patgram upazila of Lalmonirhat will remain suspended for seven days from tomorrow on account of Eid-ul-Azha.

Mehedi Hasan, assistant director of the Bangladesh Land Port Authorities at Burimari Land Port, said the movement of passport-holding travellers through the check-post will continue as usual.

He added that trade activities through the Burimari Land Port will resume on June 22.

Free rein for gold smugglers in Jhenaidah

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“We don't have to do anything. The smuggling syndicate members do all the job,” he said.

According to intelligence and police sources, about 40 bikers are engaged in carrying consignments to Jashore and Jhenidah borders.

“We deliver the consignment to a designated place at the border, where another carrier receives it. The consignment is then smuggled into India considering the border security situation,” a second carrier said.

According to him, the carriers at the border who smuggle the gold into India get Tk 1 to Tk 2 lakh, depending on the consignment size.

Most carriers have gone into hiding after Bangladesh and India police opened an investigation into the murder mystery surrounding Jhenaidah-4 MP Anwarul Azim Anar in Kolkata, although a number of consignments crossed into India in recent days, according to sources.

Azim was one of the influential kingpins who used to control the smuggling racket since Maheshpur became a safe gateway, as parts of its border with India have no fence, according to four carriers, three local elected representatives and an intelligence source.

**AZIM: INVENTOR OF
TOKEN SYSTEM**

Gold smuggling through this border has been taking place for the last four to five decades, with Azim assuming a leading role about 10 years ago, they said.

But long before that, he started smuggling gold into India through a group of bikers in 1986, when he was a student and actively involved with the Purbo Banglar Communist Party, according to an intelligence source.

Over time, he came up with the idea of recruiting salaried carriers and introducing a token system for law

enforcers, the intelligence source adds.

The token system works as a gate pass: when carriers produce it, law enforcers do not “disturb” them. In exchange, the law enforcers get a “handsome cut”.

Abul Kalam Azad, chairman of Barobazar Union Parishad, said he is aware of the token system.

“Law enforcers would not stop the bike once you showed the token. But those days are gone now that we have declared a war against smuggling,” he told The Daily Star.

According to the intelligence source, Azad was once part of Azim's racket, an allegation Azad rejected.

“I am not involved with gold smuggling,” he said, even before this newspaper could finish asking him the question about his link.

Mahbubur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Maheshpur Police Station, denied having any facilitating role in the smuggling operations.

“We do not know about any token system. Police along with the Border Guard Bangladesh are working round the clock to stop all sorts of smuggling, including gold,” he said.

A HOTSPOT

A senior police official in the district admitted that Maheshpur is a hotspot for smuggling gold into India. “But we often cannot take action as public representatives are involved.”

According to police sources, smuggled gold enters Bangladesh mainly from Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Singapore and Malaysia through Dhaka, Sylhet and Chattogram airports.

A significant portion of the gold is then smuggled into India through Chuadanga, Jashore and Jhenaidah borders, with Jhenidah's Matila border point being one of the most preferred routes. Sometimes, the racket uses rail routes as well, police sources said.

Instead of directly smuggling gold into India from other countries,

smugglers use Bangladesh as a transit route as both the legal system and payment method involving gold are stricter in the neighbouring country.

MASTERMIND UNTOUCHED

Over the years, police and BGB members seized some gold consignments and arrested some carriers, but the masterminds have always remained untouched.

Any information leak, even the possibility of it, can lead to murders.

On January 17 this year, two men were shot dead in Baghadanga village of Maheshpur following a dispute over a gold consignment.

According to police and local journalists, the killings are linked to a gold consignment weighing 4.66 kilogrammes.

The 58 BGB battalion seized the consignment in the morning and the two were killed in the afternoon. It later emerged that the consignment's owner fled to India after the incident.

OC Mahbubur Rahman said an investigation into the matter is underway.

Local BGB seized around 38.4 kgs of gold in 2022, around 37.56 kgs in 2023, and 27 kgs in the first three months of this year.

At least 30 people were arrested in connection with the seizures and 25 cases were filed, but police could not track down a single mastermind in any of the cases.

Incidents of any gold carriers facing punishments are also rare. In the last 10 years, only two carriers have been handed a one-year jail term and a fine of Tk 50,000 each.

Lt Col Shah Md Azizush Shahid, commander of the Maheshpur 58 BGB battalion, said in most cases, they can only arrest the carriers.

“We cannot track down the mastermind as we are not an investigation agency. We simply hand the arrestees over to the police, who carry out the probe,” he said.

Bangladesh may lose a third of agri output by 2050

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continue to be hampered by climate change,” the WB said in the report.

Green growth – which balances economic prosperity with environmental compliance, benefits and protection – can be a strong and sustainable driver of growth.

Subsequently, the report proposed nine key policy directions that aim to achieve three overarching objectives: effective environmental governance and energy transition, new engines and skills for green growth and a just transition to a resilient, green and healthy society.

The policy directions include strengthening environmental governance, promoting renewable energy trade, promoting inclusive connectivity through green transport and logistics systems, investing in green industries and human capital, and improving public health and wellbeing, among others.

It is important that all the recommended policies work together for them to be successful, the report said.

“Global experience shows that growth that harms the environment cannot be sustained. On the other hand, green

growth can offer a strong and effective way to reduce poverty while safeguarding our environment, essentially serving as a catalyst for growth,” said Abdoulaye Seck, the WB's country director for Bhutan and Bangladesh.

Highlighting several shortcomings of budget implementation in climate financing, the report says Bangladesh has multiple environmental laws, regulations and plans and yet demonstrates weak performance in environmental management.

Implementation challenges primarily relate to two issues.

One is a case for prioritisation of public investment within the annual development programme managed by the planning ministry together with line ministries.

Second, limited coordination exists between the ADP formulation process and the annual budget process, which is managed by the finance ministry.

“These shortcomings have resulted in an inefficient public investment management system, with insufficient budgetary allocations to investment projects and a low execution rate,” the

explosions were heard.

Members of Border Guard Bangladesh and Bangladesh Coast Guard are on alert, he added.

Meanwhile, about 280 people – mostly labourers who had gone to the island for work – reached Teknaf on small boats, said Abdur Rashid, president of Trawler Owners' Association of Teknaf St Martin's route.

The boats avoided the Naf, where the water is usually calm, and reached the west side of Shah Porir Dwip braving the choppy sea.

Kelayet Ullah, a journalist of St Martin's Island, said the sea was rough and travelling on a fishing trawler could be risky.

But many locals of the island who had been stuck in Teknaf braved the rough sea and went home on fishing trawlers.

Meanwhile, Dhaka has written to

WB said in the report.

Bangladesh's climate-related allocation currently stands at 7.5 percent of the total budget or 0.8 percent of GDP.

The report also highlighted weaknesses in Bangladesh's financial sector weaknesses.

Structural weaknesses in Bangladesh's banking system and institutional bottlenecks pose some of the biggest challenges to increasing the volume and range of green financing instruments, resulting in green investments being perceived as riskier than non-green ones.

“Borrowers face huge hurdles in adopting and financing green practices, resulting in insufficient financial flows and an inadequate pipeline of projects,” the WB said.

The report also proposed investing in urban mass transit systems that are green, accessible, reliable and inclusive.

It also called for implementing green building policies and guidelines, promoting the use of electronic vehicles (2/3 wheelers) for inclusive green growth, and promoting pedestrian and bicycle-friendly urban streets.

Naypyidaw, protesting incidents of shooting at Bangladeshis trawlers between Teknaf and the St Martin's Island.

Nobody of Bangladesh should be targeted, a foreign ministry official told The Daily Star yesterday, adding that Bangladesh had protested incidents of shelling inside its territory before.

“Any conflict inside Myanmar is their internal affair, but that should not affect the people and properties in Bangladesh,” the official said.

The conflict between the Myanmar junta force and the Arakan Army intensified since February. The junta troops had to step back and many fled to Bangladesh during battles.

The Arakan Army states that the objective of its armed revolution is to restore the sovereignty of the Arakan people.

Rejoinder, our reply

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was working for last 06 (six) months on the Airbus was given the responsibility to evaluate the earlier report and submit its report.

It is worth mentioning that no new committee/second committee was formed rather due to normal retirement of the Committee Chairman from the service, then the Co-Chairman was given the responsibility of the existing TFC.

The same TFC applied the standard apps used by other airlines in calculating fluctuation of prices like cost of ticket, fuel and other incidental expenses and earning. So the TFC did not make a U-turn as alleged rather used technology to provide right picture about the purchase.

The report also mentions that Biman is a losing concern about which we would like to state firmly that Biman is always on the operational profit and has been able to pay all its dues and installments to all the foreign companies including Boeing.

It is noteworthy that, Biman Bangladesh Airlines is a 100% state-owned national flag carrier limited company and fully covers all operating expenses including aircraft purchase, payment of advance installments and maintenance related expenses with its own income.

Biman is being rated AAA long term rating by Dun & Bradstreet South Asia Middle East Ltd., a renowned US credit rating agency. During Covid pandemic Biman was given BDT1000 Crore by the Government as loan under incentive package but The Daily Star failed to mention that the amount with interest was paid back to the Government in less than 01 (one) year.

Besides, there are standard laid down policies for purchasing new aircraft to the fleet. Aircraft procurement process is conducted by following the said policy without any deviation. Discussions with Airbus have recently started with the signing of a Joint Communique on the acquisition of Airbus and mutual cooperation in the aviation sector.

At the same time, discussions are ongoing with Biman's long-time tested business partner, the aircraft manufacturer Boeing Company. The final decision will be made public through press briefing after the conclusion of due internal process. Besides, as part of the expansion process, the pilot recruitment program is currently ongoing.

The national flag carrier, Biman Bangladesh Airlines has been providing regular passenger and cargo services as well as operating Hajj flights, VVIP flights, UN mission flights and special flights on various national and international calamities like Covid-19.

With a fleet of only 21 (twenty-one) state-of-the-art aircraft, Biman Bangladesh Airlines currently operates regular flights to 23 (twenty-three) international and 8 (eight) domestic destinations despite many limitations. Recently, 04 (four) new routes have been launched by the existing 21 (twenty-one) aircraft. It may be noted here that out of 21 (twenty-one) aircraft, only 10 (ten) are used for long range, 06 (six) short range and 05 (five) domestic destinations.

In order to increase the number of passengers by air, in the coming days, Biman Bangladesh Airlines is constantly working to expand the passenger services to destinations like Male, Kunming, New York, Sydney, Wuhan, Jakarta, Seoul etc. Due to various reasons, it has not been possible to add the required number of aircraft to the fleet till now. As a result, it is not possible to launch flights on many attractive routes despite of huge demand.

In order to increase the network and quality of passenger services in keeping pace with the increasing passengers demand, a plan has already been adopted to expand the aircraft

fleet from 21 (twenty-one) to 47 (forty-seven) by 2035. For this purpose, the process of reviewing the proposals of the aircraft manufacturers is ongoing as per the guidelines of the Biman Board of Directors and the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism.

In order to cope with the competitive aviation business and to operate business profitably, when a process for procurement of aircraft is underway to implement future fleet expansion which is expected to go through various stages before finalization, such kind of news are being used to mislead the public with ill intention by making concocted story with speculative and unsubstantiated information.

Such kinds of news damages the image of the state flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines. Biman Bangladesh Airlines is a state-owned airline which sometimes has to operate under the requirement of the nation. Biman's Positive contribution seldom gets media coverage.

A case in point is the recent Malaysian Flights where Biman charged only about BDT170,000 whereas other airlines charged over BDT100,000 per passenger. The Daily Star failed to report this comparison to the public.

Biman has consistently maintained its success as a profitable company. Biman has been making profit consistently especially in the last three years (post-Covid period) and is operating profitably in the current fiscal year as well.

In such a situation, Biman Management urges all concerned to stop publishing misleading news that creates negative impression in the public mind based on unsupported, partial and false information and refrain from trying to hinder the development of Biman Bangladesh Airlines.

THE DAILY STAR'S RESPONSE

Only selective portions of Biman's 854-word rejoinder directly pertains to the report in question while the rest is details in length the many achievements of the national flag carrier, which are not relevant to the topic at hand.

The Daily Star acknowledges the usage of the term “new committee” and only in that regard, we stand corrected – but we still stand by the fact that reconstituted committee did not have the same members.

While the chairman of the committee retired and went back to his mother organisation (Bangladesh Air Force) in the time period between the two reports, that is hardly the only change in constitution of the committee.

The general manager of finance and accounts, the general manager of internal audit, a deputy secretary of the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism (MoCAT) and the dean of aviation standardisation of the regulations and safety department from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Aviation and Aerospace University (BSMRAU) were noticeably missing from the reconstituted committee.

The reconstituted (second) committee additionally had the director of engineering and material management, the deputy general manager of cost and budget, the dean of the faculty of aviation engineering and technology of BSMRAU, and a senior assistant secretary from MoCAT – all new faces in the committee that produced the second report.

The first committee had 20 members, meaning 25 percent of the committee was reconstituted for the second evaluation.

Given that the reconstituted committee had three days to overturn the evaluation, the four new members out of 19 hardly had any time to fully acquaint themselves with the complex research this issue required and come to a conclusion.

The fact still remains, that this

committee was given such a short time – which was not contested by the rejoinder – to evaluate a multimillion dollar deal that will impact the aviation sector in next two decades to follow.

The rejoinder said that the technofinancial committee used “technology” and “standard apps” to provide the “right picture” about the purchase – both vague terms. This begs the question – was the first committee not using technology to create their extremely detailed and technically exhaustive report?

A comparison between the two reports that they are differ mainly in two regards: the cash-flow statement and the recommendation about whether or not to procure the aircrafts. The two reports are almost identical in the sections detailing the challenges of inducing Airbus planes, and the estimates of investment required.

This includes the cost estimates for maintenance, cost estimates for training and recruitment, and details on how the planes will be financed and what the financial packages will be.

This raises the question – if “technology” was used to arrive at different finding for profit and loss, then why are the sections on evaluation of investment estimates identical? At no point in its second evaluation report or Biman's rejoinder has Biman shown how it overcame these investment challenges to arrive at the net profit estimates that it did.

About losses – the newspaper simply detailed out which sectors were not profitable, and cited audit objections made by the government's Commercial Audit Directorate that were submitted to a Parliamentary Standing Committee.

The Directorate's report said that in the 2022-23 fiscal, Biman Bangladesh Airlines made a net loss of Tk 259.1 million (Tk 25 crore 91 lakh) in its main airline business. The report also detailed that Biman concealed its liabilities, e.g. money owed to Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh.

The rejoinder stated that a plan has already been adopted to expand the aircraft fleet from 21 (twenty-one) to 47 (forty-seven) by 2035. The Daily Star is in possession of documents showing that at the time of publication, the Biman Fleet Planning Committee's permission had not been taken before making strides in procuring Airbus planes, a deviation from Biman's own procurement policy.

The Daily Star stands by its report.

Israeli forces

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the offensive that began on October 7, the Gaza health ministry said in a statement yesterday. Some 30 Palestinians were killed in the previous 24 hours, the ministry added.

In a statement early yesterday, Hamas urged Blinken to put “direct pressure” on Israel for permanent Gaza ceasefire.

“He continues to talk about Israel's agreement of the latest (ceasefire) proposal, but we have not heard any Israeli official speak out on this,” it said.

Israel is standing behind a ceasefire proposal for the eight-month-old offensive in the Gaza Strip, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said yesterday, and the goal is to bridge gaps with Hamas and get to a deal soon.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a Group of Seven (G7) meeting of leaders in southern Italy, Sullivan said the world should encourage the Palestinian group to accept the proposal and avoid stalemate.

The offensive in Gaza has led to widespread destruction of homes and other infrastructure, with hospitals out of service and the UN warning of famine.