

WAR ON GAZA Talks 'likely' to resume in coming week

AFP, Palestinian Territories

A new round of negotiations for a Gaza truce and hostage release deal will "most likely" begin in the coming week, a source close to the Hamas delegation told AFP yesterday.

"Based on contacts with the mediators, we expect a new round of negotiations to begin in Cairo, most likely this week, to discuss ideas and proposals regarding a ceasefire and a prisoner exchange," said the source, who asked to remain anonymous.

Qatar had been mediating ceasefire talks for months alongside the United States and Egypt, but last month it announced it was suspending its efforts, saying Israel and Hamas needed to "show their willingness and seriousness".

On Thursday, a source close to the talks said Qatar had resumed its mediation.

Is it the end of Assad?

Syria rebels say encircling Damascus as govt denies falling back

AFP, Beirut

Rebels on a lightning advance through Syria yesterday said they have begun to encircle Damascus as government forces denied they had withdrawn from areas near the capital.

"Our forces have begun the final phase of encircling the capital, Damascus," said rebel commander Hassan Abdel Ghani, with the Islamist-led alliance that launched the offensive.

The defence ministry flatly denied the army had fled positions near the city.

"There is no truth to news claiming our armed forces, present in all areas of the Damascus countryside, have withdrawn," it said.

It also said the president is working from Damascus denying reports Assad has left the capital.

Earlier, a war monitor and Abdel Ghani said rebels were within 20 kilometres of Damascus as government forces fell back in the face of the offensive gathering even more momentum.

The Syria Observatory for Human Rights said government forces had ceded more key ground, losing control of all of southern Daraa province and evacuating posts in Quneitra, near the Israel-annexed Golan Heights.

The monitor said government forces were also pulling out of towns as little as 10 kilometres (six miles) from Damascus.

Abdel Ghani said earlier that "our forces were able to control the Saasaa (security)



branch in the Damascus countryside. The advance towards the capital continues."

Air strikes and shelling by government forces and their ally Russia killed at least seven civilians near the city of Homs, as the army sought to slow the rebel advance there.

The astounding rebel gains have brought the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and its allies to the doorstep of President Bashar al-Assad's seat of power, just over a week into a renewed offensive in a conflict that had long seemed frozen.

As the rebels seize more territory, they have also sought to reassure those living in areas now under their control.

Abdel Ghani in a statement on Telegram Saturday recognised that the rebels had taken areas where "different religious sects and minorities" live.

"We ask that all sects be reassured... for the era of sectarianism and tyranny has gone away forever," he said.

Syria's civil war, which began with Assad's crackdown on democracy protests, has killed more than 500,000 people and forced more than half the population to flee their homes.

3 pro-BNP bodies march

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The meeting also comes at a time when ties between Dhaka and Delhi are under considerable strain over various issues, including allegations of attacks on minorities in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, Indian Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) on Friday announced that activists from over 200 social and cultural organisations will march towards the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi on Tuesday.

The demonstration, coinciding with International Human Rights Day, will be held to protest against "alleged atrocities" on minority communities, including Hindus, in Bangladesh.

Rajnish Jindal, co-in-charge of the RSS Delhi unit's media and communications department, shared details at a press conference where he said the march will include representatives of various social, cultural, and religious groups under the banner of "Civil Society of Delhi".

He added that a memorandum would be submitted to the Bangladesh High Commission and international organisations such as the UN, UNHRC, WHO, Amnesty International, and ADB, urging immediate intervention to halt the "violence".

Former Indian high commissioner to Bangladesh Veena Sikri and ex-director general of the Intelligence Bureau Rajiv Jain also spoke at the event, expressing grave concern over the situation.

"This is the worst situation for Hindus and other minority communities in Bangladesh since the Liberation War of 1971," Veena claimed.

In another development, hoteliers in Barak valley of the north eastern state of Assam have announced that they would not host any Bangladesh national till alleged attacks on Hindus and other minorities in that country stop, PTI reported from Guwahati.

This was announced by Barak Valley Hotel and Restaurant Association President Babul Rai on Friday.

Barak Valley comprises three districts of Cachar, Sribhumi (formerly Karimganj) and Hailakandi and shares a 129km-long border with Bangladesh's Sylhet region.

A PTI report from Washington said a protest march is being organised by "Hindu Action" near the White House tomorrow while another protest would be held by Hindu community leaders in Chicago today.



MARTIAL LAW FIASCO

South Korea president escapes impeachment

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol escaped impeachment yesterday over his brief declaration of martial law, after lawmakers from his ruling party boycotted a vote despite protests outside parliament.

Yoon stunned the nation and the international community Tuesday night by suspending civilian rule and sending troops to parliament, but was forced into a U-turn after lawmakers nixed his decree.

Opposition parties proposed the impeachment motion, which needed a two-thirds majority to pass, but a near-total boycott by Yoon's People Power Party (PPP) doomed it to failure.

"The number of members who voted did not reach the required two-thirds majority," National Assembly speaker Woo Won-shik said, saying that as a result, the impeachment vote was "not valid".

The country -- and the world -- was

watching, he said, adding it was "very regrettable that a vote could not even be held on such a significant national issue".

He said it signified "a failure to engage in the democratic process" on the part of the ruling party.

The PPP claimed after the vote that it had blocked the impeachment to avoid "severe division and chaos", adding that it would "resolve this crisis in a more orderly and responsible manner".

The outcome disappointed the huge crowds -- numbering 150,000 according to police, one million according to organisers -- demonstrating outside parliament for Yoon's ouster.

The opposition has already vowed to try again as soon as Wednesday, and protesters vowed to continue demonstrations.

"I will impeach Yoon Suk Yeol, who has become the worst risk for South Korea, at any cost," opposition leader Lee Jae-myung said.

Arson attack

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The decorations, roof, and idol were damaged, according to the case statement.

Babul said the criminals had fled the scene before he woke up.

Some Indian media outlets reported that the temple was affiliated with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness Bangladesh.

However, Hrishikesh Gouranga

Das, spokesperson of the organisation, told The Daily Star that the temple was not directly affiliated.

"There is an ISKCON-affiliated temple near the family-owned one, and we use it jointly during major events," he explained.

Sub-inspector Saiful Islam told The Daily Star that he visited the site yesterday and spoke with locals.

"We are trying to collect CCTV footage," he said.

Finally begins on Dec 16

FROM PAGE 12

buses instead and started the process of buying 130 electric buses in July 2022.

However, the company changed its mind again and floated a tender to procure 137 diesel-run AC buses for the service last year. But the authorities cancelled the first tendering process over forgery by two foreign companies and started re-tender process earlier this year, sources said.

Md Moniruzzaman, managing director of Dhaka BRT Company, yesterday said the bidding process is now at the final stage and awaits board approval.

Once the contractor is appointed, they would supply the first lot (50 buses) within four months, said Moniruzzaman, adding that they are hopeful of launching the fully-fledged BRT service from June next year.

As the bus procurement process is taking time, the adviser directed them to start the service with BRTC buses, so that the infrastructure does not remain unused, he said.

Ehsanul Hoque, senior secretary of the Road Transport and Highways Division, also talked about introducing the service at an event in Gazipur yesterday.

BRTC, from December 1, with two buses started the test run on the BRT route and will launch the service with 10 buses from December 16, Moniruzzaman told The Daily Star yesterday.

A BRTC officer said the service will have seven stoppages at Gulistan, Shahbagh, Farmgate, Airport, College Gate, Board Bazar, Joydebpur Chowrasta, and Shibbari, and the fare would be Tk 140.

The BRTC buses will use the Dhaka Elevated Expressway, and it would take around two hours to reach Shibbari in Gazipur from Gulistan.

Responding to a question, Moniruzzaman said, "BRTC bus service will definitely not be same as the BRT service."

He, however, said only cars and BRTC buses would be allowed to use the BRT dedicated corridor built on the middle of Dhaka-Gazipur Road, a part

of Dhaka-Mymensingh highway, and other buses will use the existing road.

Formally known as Greater Dhaka Sustainable Urban Transport Project, it was originally planned to be completed by December 2016 at a cost of Tk 2,037.9 crore.

But long delay was caused by issues relating to land acquisition, relocation of utility services, design changes, contractors running out of money, and the pandemic. Moreover, physical work was suspended twice.

As a result, the total project cost is now estimated at Tk 4,268.3 crore and the deadline is December 2024. But the authorities sought one more year to complete the work.

Once the dedicated rapid bus service comes into operation, it is supposed to allow people to reach Dhaka from Gazipur in 35-40 minutes, which now takes between 1.5 and two-three hours.

Till September this year, the project saw 97.14 progress, shows progress report. However, the project got a setback after miscreants damaged 22 escalators to be used for elevated stations on the route during July-August student movement.

Apart from installing the escalators, the authorities will have to do several other works to launch the BRT service completely, including hiring bus operator and installing intelligent transportation system (ITS) service at stoppages for automatic ticketing services and other issues.

BRT Managing Director Moniruzzaman said initially they will hire BRTC as operator, and a memorandum of understanding is getting ready in this regard.

He, however, said ITS system may not be ready even in next June and in that case, they will go for semi-automated ticketing system.

The project is being jointly implemented by the Roads and Highways Department, Bangladesh Bridge Authority, and Local Government Engineering Department, with the lion's share of the fund coming from foreign loan.

From PM to UP member

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"We must ensure accountability everywhere. It's not something that cannot be achieved overnight, but it is possible... If you think about your family, it thrives because of accountability," he said.

The workshop, titled "31-Point State Structure Reform Proposal and Public Engagement," was organised by the BNP Training Affairs Committee at the Faridpur Sadar Upazila Complex.

Tarique said corruption, anarchy, breakdowns in law and order, and other misdeeds occurred during the autocratic regime of Sheikh Hasina due to a complete lack of accountability.

He said the Awami League arranged one-sided elections repeatedly, while its leaders and workers indulged in widespread looting and siphoning off vast amounts of money abroad. All these were possible because there was no accountability to the people.

"So, we aim to address corruption, establish the rule of law, and strengthen the healthcare sector for a better future of the people. We also want to create an environment where students can access quality education in the country. As a political activist, I believe much can be achieved if accountability is established," the BNP leader said.

He said a free and fair election is essential to restore accountability, reclaim people's lost rights, and implement BNP's 31-point proposal for gradually building a new Bangladesh. "It's only natural that a party like the BNP would call for a fair election. To make this happen, everyone has to play their part."

The BNP leader recalled how people from all walks of life united to force the autocratic Awami League regime to "flee the country". "Similarly, we must all unite to establish our rights."

"If we want to achieve our goals, I need cooperation from all leaders and workers. The first condition for this cooperation is maintaining people's confidence. To do that, we must act, speak, and behave according to the will of the people," he said.

The BNP leader acknowledged that some party leaders and activists might be making mistakes. However, he said, this cannot go on. "We must stay alert and warn them. In some cases, we must take strict action."

Tarique said people's confidence is the most precious asset of any political party, its leaders, and its activists. "We will lose everything if we lose people's confidence. So, let's pledge to preserve it. If we sit idle at home thinking BNP has already earned people's trust, that confidence will gradually erode."

Tarique called upon his party colleagues to correct themselves first to gain and retain people's confidence and fight against extortion, corruption and immoral activities.

"Correct yourselves first and then tell others to amend themselves. Otherwise, there's no point in talking big about eliminating immoral activities and extortion," he said.

He said their party is taking organisational actions against party men engaged in such activities. He said the party is even taking extreme measures such as filing written complaints to the administration against the culprits who have broken laws defying party directives.

He said their party wants stability in Bangladesh as soon as possible to address the existing problems properly.

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