



Guatemalan migrants deported from the United States are assisted at the Returnee Reception Centre following their arrival at the Guatemalan Air Force Base in Guatemala City on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

Israel military intercepts Hezbollah drone

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli military said it intercepted a surveillance drone launched by Lebanese militant group Hezbollah yesterday amid a fragile ceasefire.

"A short while ago, a Hezbollah surveillance UAV that was launched toward Israeli territory was intercepted by the Israeli Air Force," the military said in a statement.

On Wednesday, five people were injured in an Israeli drone strike targeting the southern Lebanese town of Majdal Selm, the Lebanese health ministry said.

On Tuesday, Israeli airstrikes injured 36 people in Nabatieh, a major town in south Lebanon, according to the health ministry. The Israeli military said it had struck Hezbollah vehicles that were transporting weapons on the edge of Nabatieh.

The Israeli army also detained three people on Wednesday in southern border town of Maroun al-Ras, Lebanese state news agency NNA reported.

Israel has carried out strikes in southern Lebanon although Hezbollah and Israel agreed on a ceasefire in late November.

Lebanese Hezbollah chief Naim Qassem said on Monday that the group would not accept any justifications to extend the period for Israeli troops' withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Israel cuts ties with UN aid agency

Aid delivery to Gaza likely to be hampered; Hamas hands over 8 more hostages to Israel; 2 buses carrying freed Palestinian prisoners leave Ofer prison



AFP, Jerusalem

Israel cut ties with the UN agency for Palestinian refugees yesterday following accusations it provided cover for Hamas, a move likely to hamper delivery of its vital services after 15 months of offensive in Gaza.

The agency, UNRWA, will be banned from operating on Israeli soil, and contact between it and Israeli officials will also be forbidden.

UNRWA has provided support for Palestinian refugees around the Middle East for over 70 years, but has long clashed with Israeli officials, who have repeatedly accused it of undermining the country's security.

The hostility intensified in the wake of Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, with accusations that UNRWA employees participated in the assault.

"Humanitarian aid doesn't equal UNRWA, and UNRWA doesn't equal humanitarian aid. UNRWA equals an organisation infested with Hamas terror activity," Israeli foreign ministry spokesman Oren Marmorstein wrote

on social media platform X ahead of the ban.

"This is why, beginning on January 30 and in accordance with Israeli law, Israel will have no contact with UNRWA."

Meanwhile, Hamas freed three Israeli hostages and five foreigners in return for 110 Palestinian prisoners to be freed in the latest stage of a ceasefire deal.

AFP reporters later yesterday said two buses carrying freed Palestinian prisoners left Ofer prison.

First to be freed was Israeli woman soldier Agam Berger, 20, handed over to International Committee of the Red Cross officials in Jabalia in the north of the Palestinian territory.

The Israeli military said another two Israelis and five foreigners were later handed over to the Red Cross and en route for Israel.

The Palestinian prisoners, who include 30 minors and some members of Palestinian groups convicted for their involvement in deadly attacks in Israel, were set to be taken to the West Bank or Gaza later in the day.

DHAKA-DELHI TIES  
They need each other for mutual benefits  
Kugelman tells Star event

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center in Washington DC, yesterday said India's concerns over the recent regional developments stem from the warming of relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan, which includes the "Jamaat factor."

"My sense is what worries India the most here is the Jamaat factor and the Pakistan factor, particularly Bangladesh's efforts to build up a better relationship with Pakistan."

He made the remarks at a discussion titled "Bangladesh at Geopolitical Crossroads", organised by The Daily Star on its premises in the capital yesterday.

"My sense is that India would like to see an election here [Bangladesh] sooner rather than later... If there is an election anytime in the next year or so, whatever the case, there's a good chance BNP would come back.

"And I think India might feel that if BNP is serious about ending its alliance or connection with Jamaat, that could create more opportunities for India to actually be comfortable engaging with the government in Dhaka."

Kugelman referred to the improving Bangladesh-Pakistan relations as one of the most significant geopolitical developments in South Asia at the moment. After over a decade, the two countries are witnessing key developments, including a liberalised visa regime.

"It seems the two countries are looking to expand trade... But realistically, I'm not sure how far this relationship could go in the foreseeable future. I'm not sure what Pakistan can offer Bangladesh in terms of trade.

"Ultimately, I'm not sure that India would be super concerned about the trajectory of these developments in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations so long as these relations don't take on a military or security dimension."

He said that from India's perspective, there might be hope of getting the Bangladesh-India relationship "back on track", highlighting that both countries need each other for trade interests, border security, and connectivity.



People suffer for hours

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institution be recognised as a University in its own right. Those five students along with several hundred others blocked the road yesterday.

Around 9 o' clock last night, a government delegation led by Joint Secretary Nuruzzaman of the education ministry, Titumir College Principal Shipra Rani Mondal and other officials talked with the students for over an hour, but no agreement was reached.

Habibullah Rony, a representative of the students, said the protesters would not break their fast and leave the street until Titumir was declared a university.

Addressing the students, Nuruzzaman said, "No one is saying that your demand is unreasonable. You have been fighting for 28 years, and we know you will eventually succeed. But declaring the college a university right now is not possible. There's a process. For now, please return home."

The institution established in 1968 currently functions under the National University.

The protesters also demand dormitories for all students, "internationally recognised" subjects, recruitment of teachers with PhDs, lowering

the number of student admissions, and a research lab.

Students under the banner "Titumir Oikyo" demonstrated several times in the last few months. On Monday night, the group gave the government 48-hours to meet their demands.

On November 18, they blocked the same road. Several train carriages at Mohakhali level-crossing were vandalised at the time.

Muggers

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College Hospital.

At the hospital, he told reporters that he had gone to his aunt's house in Adabor 10 in the morning and was returning to Darussalam when he was attacked.

"As I reached Adabor Balur Maath, a group, including someone named 'Tunda Babu', tried to snatch my mobile phone. When I resisted, they attacked me with a machete, severing my left hand from the wrist," Sumon recounted.

He claimed that he did not know any of the attackers beforehand but overheard someone mention the name 'Tunda Babu' during the assault.

"They chopped me with a machete just to take my phone away."

Dhaka must focus on people-centric foreign ties

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importance and it feeds into foreign policy and foreign relations."

He added that foreign investors typically prefer governments with a four to five-year-long tenure. "Since there is an interim government now, most foreign investors may feel 'shy'.... Therefore, we need to reach out to the Bangladeshi diaspora in terms of remittance."

Sobhan also emphasised the need for careful management of Bangladesh's relationships with key countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Malaysia, and others in the Gulf.

He also noted the importance of safeguarding export markets in the US and European Union. "We need to also be more proactive with Washington.

We need to leverage the Bangladeshi diaspora, which I feel has the capacity to play a much bigger role there."

Professor Selim Raihan, of Dhaka University's economics department and executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling, said the world has become highly unpredictable, especially under the Trump administration, which has significant implications for Bangladesh.

"From an economist's perspective, it's very concerning as the global rules-based trade architecture may be seriously affected. LDCs like Bangladesh benefited a lot from the rules-based system built 50-60 years ago.

"There comes a question of whether the country is strong enough internally,

both in the economic and political perspectives, to deal with this very adverse global situation."

Selim also criticised the lack of a coherent foreign policy in the past, when crony capitalism took hold in Bangladesh. "Cronies don't really need a foreign policy because they need to serve their own interests. They can have relations with any foreign partners.

"So, unless there is a significant change in domestic politics, we won't see significant improvement in our foreign policy."

He further noted that some countries have benefitted from adverse global situations, pointing to opportunities Bangladesh missed during Trump's first term when the US-China trade war began.

"Opportunities actually

emerged for countries like Bangladesh, but we could not reap the benefits because we were not prepared. And I can tell you that we are still not prepared."

Shafiq Munir, senior research fellow at the Bangladesh Institute for Peace and Security Studies, recommended that the interim government establish a commission to oversee Bangladesh's foreign policy and international relations.

He stressed that alongside reforms in state institutions and the economy, it is crucial to review and reassess the country's foreign policy. "We need to identify our problems -- what kind of a foreign policy do we need, and is our existing structure equipped to embark on that kind of issue?"

IMF pushing for 15pc VAT

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"When I exempted some products from the latest VAT hike measure, they [IMF] asked me what have you done? Then I told the IMF that we have some political imperatives -- we cannot take measures by considering only the economic side. People's perception has to be considered too."

The IMF then came around, he said, adding that the schedule for the loan approval has not been deferred.

The staff mission informed during negotiations that the loan proposal will be placed

in its board meeting in March. The IMF is likely to focus more on Bangladesh's dismal revenue mobilisation by making the remaining fund disbursement under a \$4.7 billion loan conditional on meeting the tax collection target.

Until now, the tax collection target has not been a Quantitative Performance Criteria (QPC), mandatory benchmarks the country must meet to unlock instalments under the loan programme.

The IMF staff mission on their last visit to Dhaka indicated that they would

make tax collection target a QPC. The Daily Star has learnt from finance ministry officials involved with the negotiations.

The staff mission was in Dhaka last month to assess the country's performance before the release of the fourth tranche of the loan.

"Bangladesh's low tax-to-GDP ratio calls for urgent tax reforms to establish a fairer, more transparent system and sustainably increase revenue, focusing on rationalising exemptions, improving compliance and separating tax policy from

administration," said the staff mission after the visit.

The IMF's emphasis on ramping up tax collection comes after recommendations for measures to boost revenue were not reflected in the budget for fiscal 2024-25.

As per the IMF's estimates, the tax measures will bump up Bangladesh's tax-to-GDP ratio by 0.5 percentage points this fiscal year.

Bangladesh failed to meet the tax revenue collection targets so far under the programme, which started in January 2023.

Govt condemns

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after the venue was vandalised by locals and madrasa students on Tuesday.

"Women are equal citizens of Bangladesh and enjoy the same human and civil rights as men. The interim government is doing everything in its power to ensure that they enjoy their full rights as Bangladeshi citizens," the statement said.

The government in the statement vowed to hold accountable people who impose their restrictions on girls and women in violation of their rights.

Meanwhile, Fisheries and Livestock Adviser Farida Akhtar made a post on her verified Facebook page last night saying: "Those who prevented women from playing football in Joypurhat have committed a crime. Women will rightfully take to field again."

**PROBE LAUNCHED**

The district administration of Joypurhat yesterday formed a five-member committee to investigate

the attack on a girls' football match venue.

The committee, headed by Additional Deputy Commissioner Bipul Kumar, has been asked to submit its report by Sunday, our Dinajpur correspondent reported.

The district administration also asked the Akkelpur Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) to submit a separate report by Friday, said Deputy Commissioner Afroza Aktar Chowdhury.

No case was recorded over the attack until the filing of the report at around 8:00pm last night, said Anisur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Akkelpur Police Station.

On Tuesday afternoon, approximately 500 protesters, including local Muslims and madrasa students, vandalised the venue at Tilakpur High School field in the upazila. The attack followed a rally at Swadhinata Chattar, demanding the cancellation of the match.

সাজই শেষ দিৱ

ভাৱৰ টকাৱ নিজৰ বাড়ী

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