

Myanmar death toll keeps rising

Junta chief faces protest in Thailand; thousands in desperate need for food, shelter

AFP, Bangkok

Protesters displayed a banner calling Myanmar's junta chief a "murderer" as he joined a regional summit in Bangkok yesterday, a week after a huge earthquake killed thousands and left desperate survivors pleading for food and shelter.

More than 3,000 people are confirmed dead after the 7.7-magnitude quake and the United Nations estimates that up to three million may have been affected in some way – many left without shelter after their homes were destroyed.

Many nations have sent aid and rescue teams but there is little sign of Myanmar's ruling military helping survivors on the ground in some of the worst-hit areas.

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing held talks with leaders from Bay of Bengal littoral nations at a plush Bangkok hotel on Friday.

The decision to invite him drew criticism, and protesters outside the venue hung a banner from a bridge reading: "We do not welcome murderer Min Aung Hlaing."

The latest death toll in Myanmar stands at 3,145, with 4,589 injured and 221 missing, according to state media. In Bangkok, 22 people were killed, most of them crushed when a tower block under construction collapsed.

In Sagaing, the central Myanmar city close to the epicentre of last week's



PHOTO: AFP

People sleep in the open in Mandalay yesterday, following the March 28 earthquake.

quake and where an estimated 80 percent of buildings have been damaged, AFP journalists witnessed desperate scenes in recent days as hundreds of exhausted, hungry survivors scrambled for supplies.

Teams of citizen volunteers from around Myanmar piled into Sagaing in trucks laden with water, oil, rice and other basic necessities.

With so many homes in Sagaing and neighbouring Mandalay left uninhabitable by the quake, survivors have been sleeping in the streets for a week, and are badly in need of proper shelter.

A patch of land in Mandalay – a dustbowl covered in trash – has sprouted a tent city of people from ruined homes or others too scared to return because of

aftershocks.

"There are many people who are in need," cab driver Hla Myint Po, 30, now living in tents with his family, told AFP.

"Sometimes when donors bring things it's chaos."

While the crisis rages in Myanmar, Min Aung Hlaing sat down Thursday night for a gala dinner with fellow leaders from the BIMSTEC group at the \$400-a-night Shangri-La hotel in Bangkok.

The veteran general ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government in a 2021 coup, triggering a bloody civil war, and has been accused of war crimes and serious human rights abuses.

Min Aung Hlaing is under multiple global sanctions and the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor has sought an arrest warrant for him for alleged crimes against humanity committed against Rohingya Muslims.

The junta has carried out dozens of attacks on its own people since the quake, the UN said, including more than 16 air strikes since the military joined rebel groups in declaring a temporary ceasefire to allow aid to get through.

However, the junta chief was given red carpet treatment by the Thai government as he arrived for the meeting with Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and other leaders from Bay of Bengal nations.

South Sudan

clashes kill 30

AFP, Juba

At least 30 people were killed when a northern South Sudanese town was briefly overrun by an armed youth group, a local official said Thursday, following a cattle raid.

Clashes involving pastoralists and settled farming communities are common in the world's youngest country, but this incident comes as tensions rise over South Sudan's fragile political situation.

The attack in northern Ruweng Administrative Area began earlier in the week when a group of armed youth stole lambs before they were scared off by security forces , said Simon Chol Mialith, the local Minister of Information.

The following day, he told AFP, the group returned in greater numbers and attacked Abiemnom, and although "the youth and the security forces tried to defend the town, they were overrun by the Mayom armed youth".

On Wednesday the South Sudan People's Defence Force drove the group from the settlement, Mialith said, where calm has now been restored.

"The number has risen to 30 people confirmed dead and over 40 persons wounded," he said.

Local media reported that some of those killed were members of the armed groups, but AFP was unable to confirm this.

The incident comes as forces allied to President Salva Kiir and First Vice President Riek Machar clash across the country, sparking regional concern and threatening a fragile peace deal.

Bangladesh wants to be part of tri-nation highway project

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The discussion also focused on investment, with Prof Yunus inviting Thai companies to join next week's investment summit in Dhaka.

He urged the Thai premier to ease visa procedures for Bangladeshis.

He said the Thai embassy in Dhaka does not have the capacity to process more visas, resulting in a long delay and a queue of Bangladeshi people willing to travel to Thailand, especially the ones seeking medical treatment.

Shinawatra assured the Bangladesh leader that she would look into the matter.

Meanwhile, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bangladesh and the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) of Thailand yesterday signed a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation in preventing corruption.

ACC Chairman

Mohammad Abdul Momen and NACC President Suchart Trakulkasemsuk signed the MoU.

Momen said many Bangladeshi corruption suspects took shelter in some of the neighbouring countries and he believes the MoU will help track them down.

During a meeting with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, Prof Yunus sought Sri Lankan support in the interim government's efforts to bring back money laundered abroad.

Harini mentioned her country's efforts to recover stolen money and said the Sri Lankan parliament ratified a new law to expedite the recovery process.

The two leaders discussed issues of mutual interest and vowed to expand trade and cooperation between the South Asian countries.

The chief adviser described the reform agenda of his government

and its plan to hold elections between this December and June next year.

During his meeting with Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, Prof Yunus stressed increased trade and connectivity between the two countries.

He urged Tshering to send a delegation of Bhutanese businesses to the Investment Summit in Dhaka next week.

They also discussed the latest development regarding the dedicated economic zone Bangladesh has earmarked for Bhutan in the northern Kurigram district.

Tshering said Bhutanese entrepreneurs were interested in investing in fruit processing and other factories in the economic zone, and exporting the products to the countries in the region.

He also sought a dedicated fibre-optic internet connection from Bangladesh. The chief adviser assured all sorts of

cooperation in this regard.

Prof Yunus said Dhaka was willing to provide more educational opportunities for Bhutanese students, especially for medical school graduates.

The Bhutanese leader hoped BIMSTEC would see

**Harini mentioned her country's efforts to recover stolen money and said the Sri Lankan parliament ratified a new law to expedite the recovery process.**

a new dynamism under the leadership of Bangladesh.

During his meeting with BIMSTEC Secretary General Indra Mani Pandey, the chief adviser asked the BIMSTEC secretariat to take an initiative for a festival to increase engagement among the youth of member states.

Mani, a former Indian

diplomat, called on Prof Yunus at the end of the summit to discuss the future initiatives of the organisation.

The chief adviser also asked Mani to ensure a separate youth gathering when BIMSTEC holds its next summit in Dhaka two years later, CA's Deputy Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad Majumder told UNB.

Mani welcomed the ideas and pledged to work on those.

As Prof Yunus inquired about FTA negotiation status among the member states, the BIMSTEC secretary general said they were working to organise a meeting of commerce and trade ministers of the bloc, the first such meeting in 21 years.

The chief adviser also asked the BIMSTEC secretary general to prepare an annual calendar of meetings planned for a better outcome.

Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain, SDG Coordinator Lamiya Morshed and

Foreign Secretary Jashim Uddin were also present during the meetings.

Prof Yunus returned last night by a Biman Bangladesh Airlines flight after attending the summit, during which the member states unanimously adopted the Bangkok Declaration and the BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision.

The latter is a strategic roadmap aimed at guiding the organisation toward sustainable development and deeper economic integration.

Bangladesh reaffirmed its commitment to advancing regional cooperation and development.

Upon receiving the chairmanship from the Thai prime minister, the chief adviser made a statement of acceptance, underscoring an inclusive and action-oriented BIMSTEC.

Unprepared Dhaka

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on land-filled wetlands as major contributors to the city's seismic risk.

**IGNORING CONSTRUCTION STANDARDS**

Dr Ansary said that in the event of a major earthquake, Dhaka would be a city of collapsed buildings, most constructed without adhering to the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC).

Poor construction materials, flawed structural designs, and unregulated expansion are turning thousands of buildings in the city into death traps.

"If an earthquake of magnitude 7 or higher strikes Dhaka, many buildings will collapse instantly," he said. "Earthquakes do not kill people – poorly built structures do."

The 2023 Turkey earthquake (magnitude 7.8) killed around 53,500 people, primarily due to building collapses.

In contrast, the 2010 Haiti earthquake (magnitude 7.0) caused nearly 230,000 deaths due to weak buildings, whereas the 2010 Chile earthquake (magnitude 8.8) killed only 280 people.

Despite releasing 800 times more energy than the Haiti earthquake, Chile's strong construction practices saved lives, he said.

Dhaka is following the same disastrous path as Haiti and Turkey. Unauthorised residential projects, particularly in Dhaka's eastern and western areas, have been built by filling floodplains, wetlands, and water bodies without proper planning to stabilise the soil. High-rise buildings continue to sprout on weak foundations, putting millions at risk, he added.

**FLAWED PLANNING AND A LACK OF OVERSIGHT**

Adil Mohammed Khan, president of the Bangladesh Institute of Planners, describes Bangladesh's cities as completely unprepared for a major earthquake.

"The recent Myanmar earthquake highlights our lack of preparedness. Construction continues without following building codes, master plans, or land-use zoning regulations," he said.

Although the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) suggests area-based variations in building size and height, recent

amendments propose a uniform Floor Area Ratio (FAR) across Dhaka, disregarding geological risks.

"No city in the world follows such a reckless planning model. Yet, Dhaka, one of the most unlivable and high-risk cities, continues to do so," he warned.

A major concern is the lack of clear mapping for Dhaka's utility networks.

A senior Rajuk official pointed out that gas leaks could cause massive fires, water supply lines could rupture, and blocked roads from collapsed buildings would make rescue efforts nearly impossible.

The city's shortage of open spaces would further cripple emergency responses.

**URGENT MEASURES NEEDED**

Given the vulnerability of Dhaka's buildings, Prof Ansary suggested classifying structures into three categories – weak (red), moderately weak (yellow), and relatively strong (green).

This would allow authorities to prioritise retrofitting efforts.

He said a similar initiative has successfully strengthened nearly 500 garment industry buildings under the Ministry of Labour.

Furthermore, third-party engineering firms should oversee construction quality to ensure adherence to BNBC guidelines.

City authorities such as Rajuk, CDA, KDA, and RDA must issue occupancy certificates only after independent verification, he said.

Dhaka's critical infrastructure – electricity, gas, telecommunications, transport, and water supply – must be reinforced against earthquakes, he added.

Experts also recommended a risk-sensitive map to guide construction and emergency shutdown protocols to prevent secondary disasters, such as gas explosions.

Md Nurul Islam, chief engineer (implementation) at Rajuk, said they have recently formed teams to monitor all the newly constructed buildings especially high-rise buildings.

They will follow whether the buildings are being constructed following the BNBC standards and building construction rules, he added.

Mob beats murder

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He said that as Aminul tried to flee, locals chased him, making him take shelter in the house of Abdur Rashid in Ronshibari village.

"The crowd surrounded the house. Upon receiving the news, police from Bagmara Police Station arrived at the scene and attempted to rescue him but failed due to resistance from the crowd. The mob tried several times to break down the door and enter the house. They demanded that the accused be handed over to them and asked the police to leave," said Touhidul.

Police and locals said around 7:30pm the enraged crowd broke into the house.

When Sub-inspector Sadikul Islam and five other police personnel tried to intervene, they were assaulted and the mob forced their way inside. Aminul was then dragged out of the house and beaten severely, eventually leading to his death.

"Two separate complaints were lodged with the Bagmara Police Station. An investigation is underway regarding the incident. No arrests were made yet as of filing this report," OC Touhidul Islam told The Daily Star.

Another body

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run without proper permission from the Muradabad Ghat. They alleged overcrowding was the main reason behind the tragedy.

However, Rashed Mia, who holds the lease of Muradabad Ghat, denied the allegations. "The boat that sank was not part of our ghat. It was privately owned," he said.

Islampur Upazila Nirbahi Officer Md Touhidur Rahman said Muradabad Ghat is under the control of the district council. "We don't have complete information about its operation, but the incident will be investigated, and legal steps will be taken," he added.

Chief Executive Officer of the Jamalpur District Council Abdullah Al Mamun Babu said a shortage of manpower makes it difficult to monitor all of the leased terminals properly.

"We are also not sure whether the sunken boat was being operated from Muradabad Ghat," he said.

Hope and fear in the haor

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quickly inundate the low-lying fields of Sylhet. Since 2017, flash floods have been a major threat to boro production. Last year, repeated floods caused significant damage.

To mitigate early flooding, the government constructs and repairs haor protection dykes in Sunamganj annually. However, the quality and progress of these projects often raise concerns. This year, 593 kilometres of dykes are being built and repaired under 693 projects across 53 haors, costing Tk 128 crore, according to the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) in Sunamganj.

As per the Kajer Binimoye Taka (Kabita) Rules 2017, all dyke construction was to be completed by February 28, but even after an extended deadline, work remains unfinished. A visit to Korchar Haor on April 2 revealed incomplete dykes at Harimaner Bhangra in Raypur-Bhadarpur, with no workers in sight.

Nawshad Miah, a marginal farmer near the site, said, "Work stopped due to Eid, and we don't know when it will resume. With recent rain, we fear the worst."

Bijon Sen Roy, general secretary of the Haor Bachao Andolon, strongly criticised the construction quality. "This year's dyke construction is the worst in recent history. If heavy rains and flash floods come, most dykes will collapse, destroying the boro harvest."

However, BWDB officials downplayed the concerns.

Mamun Hawlader, the executive engineer of BWDB in Sunamganj

and the member secretary of the district committee for dyke construction, claimed, "All basic work was completed on time, and overall progress is at 97 percent. Only finishing touches remain, and the quality is good. This year, we reinforced key dykes in seven upazilas with blocks, ensuring long-term stability."

**PEST ATTACKS AND DISEASE OUTBREAKS**

While the overall crop condition is promising, some farmers have reported damage due to pest attacks and an outbreak of blast disease, primarily triggered by the recent weather.

"The paddy looks great this year, but insect infestation is a growing concern due to the humid yet hot weather," said Mohammad Jahangir of Moulvibazar Sadar Upazila, right after he sprayed pesticides on five acres of farmland.

The lack of soil moisture has created drought-like conditions in some areas, making fields vulnerable to pest attacks and fungal infections.

However, recent rainfall in Sylhet, Sunamganj, and Moulvibazar has helped mitigate these threats.

"The rain came at the right time, ensuring a better yield," said Bimal Chandra Shome, additional director of DAE in the Sylhet division.

However, he warned that Habiganj remains at risk due to a lack of rainfall.

**LABOUR SHORTAGE AND MECHANISATION**

Another challenge this harvest season is the shortage of agricultural labour.

Many rural workers have migrated to cities in search of better-paying jobs, making it difficult for farmers to find labourers.

"In recent years, young people have lost interest in farm work, and those available demand high wages," said Jyotimohon Das from Dosmontopur in Sunamganj's Dharmapasha upazila.

"Combine harvesters are an option, but there aren't enough in our area. Besides, if it rains heavily, they can't operate in muddy fields."

The government has deployed 1,700 combine harvesters across the division, said Bimal Chandra Shome.

"We are hopeful there will be no major labour shortage normally. Labour shortages usually arise when flash floods force farmers to harvest all at once," he said.

**A CRUCIAL FEW WEEKS AHEAD**

With full-scale harvesting approaching, farmers remain on high alert. Any unexpected heavy rain or upstream water flow could devastate their crops.

"We can't predict flash floods beyond 72 hours, which is always a concern," said Mamun Hawlader. "However, the next three days are expected to be safe."

Bijon Sen Roy added, "We can't prevent flash floods, but we can protect our crops with well-built dykes. This year, that is a real concern. We have held press conferences, submitted memorandums, and sent letters to concerned advisers. If the harvest is destroyed, we will stage massive protests to demand accountability."

journalists afterwards.

Before speaking to reporters, the BNP secretary general exchanged Eid greetings with party officials, organisational leaders, and athletes at the sports ground of the party chairperson's office in Gulshan.