

Pakistan navy chief visits Bangladesh for the first time since 1971

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

On the first day of his three-day official visit to Bangladesh, Pakistan Navy Chief Admiral Naveed Ashraf paid a courtesy call on General Waker-uz-Zaman at Army Headquarters yesterday.

This marks the first visit made by a Pakistan Navy chief to Bangladesh since the Liberation War in 1971.

During the meeting, they discussed ways to strengthen defence ties and enhance the military capabilities of both forces and exchanged views on expanding cooperation through bilateral training, seminars, and exchange visits.

Admiral Ashraf also praised the professionalism of Bangladeshi participants in the joint naval exercise AMAN, held in Karachi and the North Arabian Sea in February this year, according to an Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) press release and a Bangladesh Army social media post.

The Pakistan Navy Chief also paid a courtesy call on Bangladesh Navy Chief Admiral M Nazmul Hassan at the Naval Headquarters in Banani.

Upon arrival, he was received by the Bangladesh Navy Chief and presented with a guard of honour by a naval contingent. He inspected the guard and took the salute.

The two chiefs exchanged greetings and discussed matters related to professional and training cooperation. Senior officials from both sides, including the Pakistan High Commissioner, Defence Attaché, and Principal Staff Officers from the Bangladesh Navy Headquarters, were present.

Earlier in the day, Admiral Ashraf paid homage to the members of the armed forces who made the supreme sacrifice during the Liberation War of 1971 by placing a wreath at Shikha Anirban in Dhaka Cantonment.

During his stay, Admiral Ashraf is scheduled to meet the Chief of Air Staff, the Principal Staff Officer of the Armed Forces Division, the Commandant of the National Defence College, and naval administrative authorities in Chattogram.

Meanwhile, Pakistan Navy ship PNS SAIF arrived in Chattogram on Saturday on a four-day goodwill visit. The ship's commanding officer, officers, and crew members will visit the Bangladesh Naval Academy, naval bases, and several places of interest in the port city.



Bangladesh Chief of Army Staff Gen Waker-Uz-Zaman and visiting Pakistan Naval Chief Admiral Naveed Ashraf pose for a photo at the Army Headquarters in the capital yesterday. The Pakistani navy chief arrived in Bangladesh on a three-day visit. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Fighters holed up in Rafah won't surrender

Says Hamas; one Palestinian killed in Israeli drone attack in southern Gaza

AGENCIES

Hamas fighters holed up in the Israeli-held Rafah area of Gaza will not surrender to Israel, the group's armed wing said yesterday, urging mediators to find a solution to a crisis that threatens the month-old ceasefire.

Sources close to mediation efforts told Reuters on Thursday that fighters could surrender their arms in exchange for passage to other areas of the enclave under a proposal aimed at resolving the stalemate.

Egyptian mediators have proposed that, in exchange for safe passage, fighters still in Rafah surrender their arms to Egypt and give details of tunnels there so they can be destroyed, said one of the sources, an Egyptian security official.

Yesterday's statement from Al-Qassam Brigades held Israel responsible for engaging the fighters, who it said were defending themselves.

"The enemy must know that the concept of surrender and handing oneself over does not exist in the dictionary of the Al-Qassam Brigades," the group said.

Israel said yesterday it had received the remains of a hostage that Hamas claims belong to Israeli officer Hadar Goldin, killed in the 2014 Gaza war. Israeli forensic experts are expected to determine the identity of the remains once they are brought into Israel.

Meanwhile, Israeli forces continued attacks on Palestinians in Gaza despite the



ceasefire, killing one man in the central Bureij refugee camp and two others in northern and southern parts of the territory.

In the occupied West Bank, Israeli settlers wounded at least seven Palestinians in two separate attacks yesterday morning. The settlers also raised a number of Israeli

flags along a road between Nablus and Ramallah, reports Al Jazeera online.

US special envoy Steve Witkoff said on Thursday that the proposed deal for about 200 fighters would be a test for a broader process to disarm Hamas forces across Gaza.

Al-Qassam Brigades did not comment directly on the continuing talks over the fighters in Rafah but implied that the crisis could affect the ceasefire.

"We place the mediators before their responsibilities, and they must find a solution to ensure the continuation of the ceasefire and prevent the enemy from using flimsy pretexts to violate it and exploit the situation to target innocent civilians in Gaza," the group said.

Since the US-brokered ceasefire took effect in Gaza on October 10, the Rafah area has been the scene of at least two attacks on Israeli forces, which Israel has blamed on Hamas. The group has denied responsibility.

Rafah has been the scene of the worst violence since the ceasefire took hold, with three Israeli soldiers killed, prompting Israeli retaliation that killed dozens of Palestinians.

Dhaka slams Rajnath Singh's remarks on Yunus

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh has described the recent comments made by Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus as "incorrect" and "not respectful of propriety and diplomatic nicety".

It stressed that Bangladesh remains committed to a mutually beneficial relationship with India.

"We consider that Singh's comments are incorrect and unhelpful and not respectful of propriety and diplomatic nicety," foreign ministry spokesperson SM Mahbubul Alam said as the UNB sought Dhaka's reaction to Singh's remarks yesterday.

In a conversation with Network18 Group Editor-in-Chief Rahul Joshi, Singh had urged Yunus to "watch his words".

"We do not seek tense relations with Bangladesh, but Yunus should be cautious with his statements," Singh told Joshi.

The interview was published on Friday in a report by Firstpost, a media outlet of the group.

Responding to the issue, Alam said the recent remarks made by Singh regarding Yunus have come to their attention.

He reaffirmed that Bangladesh remains committed to a mutually beneficial relationship with India based on "sovereign equality, non-interference in each other's affairs, and mutual respect".

"Bangladesh also believes that differences in perspectives are best addressed through constructive and respectful engagement," Alam added.

Four schoolgirls drown in Meherpur

Reportedly drowned while collecting water lilies

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushi

Four school girls drowned, reportedly while collecting water lilies in a lake in Meherpur this afternoon. The incident occurred at Mashuribhaja Beel in Baradi area of Meherpur sadar upazila.

The deceased were identified as Fatema Khatun, 14, and Afia, 10, daughters of Samad; Mim, 14, daughter of Isa Ali; and Aleya, 10, daughter of Saharul.

Fatema and Mim were students at Mominpur High School, while Afia and Aleya studied at Rajnagar Government Primary School.

Sumaiya Jahan Jhurka, assistant commissioner (land) of Meherpur Sadar upazila said locals believe the girls drowned while collecting water lilies.

"Residents first spotted one of the bodies around 4:30pm and later recovered three more. Fire service personnel recovered the fourth," she added.

Of the four victims, two were confirmed dead on the spot and were not taken to the hospital, while the other two were declared dead upon arrival by on-duty doctors.

Mesbauddin, officer-in-charge (OC) of Meherpur Sadar Police Station, confirming the deaths, said investigation is underway.

Barind's rice bowl is running dry

FROM PAGE 1

became so depressed by his inability to irrigate his paddy field that he tried to take his own life by drinking pesticide in 2023.

In the previous year, two Santal farmers -- Avinath Mardi and Rabi Mardi from a nearby village -- died by suicide after a tubewell operator allegedly refused them water they were entitled to, according to their family members.

Md Selim Mia, a farmer from Tanore upazila, said their tubewell, which is 40 feet deep, can no longer pump out water.

"Now we have to install a deep tubewell. We all are heavily dependent on groundwater extraction here," he added.

Both Tanore and Godagari upazilas fall in the water-stressed Barind region, known as the rice bowl of Bangladesh.

The region was comparatively a barren area even in the mid-1980s, with very limited sources of surface water. In the 1990s, the Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA) introduced deep tubewells, enabling farmers to cultivate three crops a year.

The region now faces a major crisis with groundwater levels declining fast and temperatures rising rapidly amid a change in rainfall patterns.

"Climate change is a silent killer here. In Rajshahi region, the average rainfall is 1,235mm against the nationwide average of 2,000mm," said Chowdhury Sarowar, who has been studying the region's climate for over a decade.

"If you visit the region, you'll see lots of crop fields and many fruit orchards. It's hard to understand the drought-like situation here at first glance, as all these crops and fruits are grown at the cost of groundwater," said Sarowar, a professor of geology and mining at Rajshahi University.

Crops like Aman, which are traditionally rainfed, now require frequent irrigation, he added.

Like the two upazilas in Rajshahi, Sapahar in Naogaon is also hit by an acute water shortage.

Imdadul Haque, a farmer of the upazila, said, "It doesn't rain here like before. Groundwater is declining. Even deep tubewells sometimes fail to draw water."

"If you dig deeper, you get red clay most of the time. There is no water," he said.

Only a decade ago, groundwater could be found by digging around 30 feet. Now, one may have to dig as deep as 80 feet to get water, said the farmer.

Amid a steady decline in groundwater level, the government in August declared 50 unions in 26 upazilas of four districts as severely water-stressed. Of them, 47 are in Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj, and Naogaon, and three are in Chattogram's Patiya upazila.

The government is now preparing guidelines to limit the use of water in these areas.

CHANGES IN RAINFALL PATTERNS According to a study by Bangladesh Meteorological Department, rainfall in the northern region is steadily declining.

Rajshahi division is seeing a drop in rainfall by 54mm per decade, said the study, published last year, which analysed Bangladesh's rainfall data from 1980 to 2023.

"Changes in rainfall patterns in the region mean monsoon rains are decreasing while torrential rains are increasing in the post-monsoon period," said Bazlur Rashid, a meteorologist from BMD.

Geologists said the Barind region, which covers around 7,770 square kilometres, is mostly composed of hard clay that cannot hold rainwater. The region also differs from the surrounding floodplains.

"In the region, no sand layers capable of retaining groundwater are found between 200 and 800 feet. Only hard clay exists throughout," said Anwar Zahid, former director of Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB).

"The groundwater level in the northern region has fallen up to 80 metres over the last 50 years," said Anwar, who led a study by BWDB in 2022.

He further said that the decline

in rainfall is hampering not only groundwater recharge but also causing surface water bodies to dry up.

The study, which analysed 50 years of data (from 1970 to 2020) from 465 shallow groundwater observation wells, found that the groundwater table has been in decline in at least 38 districts due to excessive extraction during the dry season.

ISING TEMPERATURE AND ITS IMPACT

The drop in rainfall has resulted in a steady rise in temperature, triggering a surge in pest populations and disrupting pollination, said agriculture experts.

Both maximum and minimum temperatures increased in all eight divisions of the country during last year's monsoon season, said the BMD study, noting that drought-prone Rajshahi recorded the steepest rise in temperature -- 0.5 degrees Celsius per decade.

Regarding its impact on agriculture, Sharmin Sultana, additional deputy director (crops) of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Rajshahi, said rising temperatures are fuelling pest outbreaks, which may affect agricultural productivity.

"With the rise in temperature, infestations of a pest, locally known as the brown grasshopper, have become more frequent. To check them, farmers need to use pesticides, which in turn pose risks to food safety," she explained.

Sharmin further said the temperature starts rising in Rajshahi in March, and when the average exceeds 35 degrees Celsius, it severely disrupts pollination of Boro, the main crop in the Barind region.

"When the temperature rises, the groundwater level drops, making irrigation increasingly difficult for farmers in the region. Moreover, many farmers suffer heatstroke while harvesting paddy or working in fields during the extremely hot months, especially in May," she added.

[Our Rajshahi correspondent Shohanur Rahman Rafi contributed to this report]

Deadlock drags on, parties urge govt

FROM PAGE 1

from the government but from a section linked to Jamaat.

The party insists that Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus himself should convene a formal dialogue, and in that case, the BNP would participate.

BNP leaders maintain that the crisis was jointly created by the government and the consensus commission, which they claim favoured Jamaat.

"During the eight-month discussion, consensus was reached on key issues. How can all parties suddenly agree on something new within seven days? This is simply in favour of Jamaat," said a BNP standing committee member, seeking anonymity.

The BNP remains adamant that the referendum and the national election should be held on the same day as part of the process for implementing the July National Charter.

At a views-exchange meeting in Thakurgaon's Sadar upazila, BNP

Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said, "Some parties are saying that a referendum should be held before the election, but we are saying it should be held on the election day."

Turning to his audience, he added, "Do you understand what a referendum or charter means? These are things only a few educated, upper-class people who have come back from America understand, and they are trying to impose these on us."

Calling the ongoing crises "manufactured", he said, "We have accepted the reforms they want to introduce. We will implement those we agree on, and those we don't agree on will go to parliament."

Jamaat's Hamidur Rahman Azad reiterated his party's demands. "These are the people's demands -- implementation of the consensus commission's recommendations, holding a referendum before national polls, and issuing the necessary order for implementation. In fact, the government is killing time by not

issuing the order."

He said the government must immediately issue the order and announce a referendum date. "The referendum must be held before the national election. Otherwise, the July uprising and all reform efforts will fail."

When The Daily Star contacted the Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam, he said the advisory council had suggested a timeframe of about a week but the parties could take more time if needed.

"Political parties have already taken some decisions during this transitional period. Hopefully, they will reach a consensus. If they fail, the advisory council will step in and make a decision as soon as possible, keeping in mind the best interests of both the parties and the people, especially with the national election expected in the first half of February," he said.

He added that ensuring a free, fair, and credible election remains the government's top priority.

Beximco firms laundered Tk 1,200 crore

FROM PAGE 1

Garments, Apollo Apparels, Autumn Loop Apparels, Bextex Garments, Cosmopolitan Apparels, Cozy Apparels, Esses Fashion, International Knitwear and Apparels, Kanchpur Apparels, Midwest Garments, Peerless Garments, Pink Maker Garments, Platinum Garments, Skynet Apparels, Springful Apparels, Urban Fashions and Winter Sprint Garments.

Investigators found that the companies opened letters of credit (L/Cs) or sales contracts through Janata Bank's Motijheel branch in Dhaka but did not repatriate the export proceeds to Bangladesh.

The earnings were instead transferred through RR Global Trading in Dubai to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, the UK, the US, Ireland and other countries.

RR Global Trading is registered in the names of Shayan and Shahryar.

Between 2020 and 2024, a total of \$96.97 million (about Tk 1,200 crore) was shown as export income, but the proceeds were not repatriated, the CID said.

For export products, the money corresponding to the value of goods shipped abroad is supposed to return within 120 days, or four months at most.

If the money does not return within this period, it is considered money laundering, Sibgat Ullah said.

As many as 17 money laundering cases were filed with the Motijheel Police Station on September 17 and 18, 2024.

Following court orders, the CID has seized various assets of the accused, including 2,000 decimals of land and establishments in Dohar, Dhaka; a 6,189.54-square-foot flat in Gulshan's "The Envoy"

building; and a 2,713-square-foot triplex flat at Plot 31, Road 68/A, in Gulshan.

The CID also froze multiple bank accounts and imposed travel bans on the accused.

The estimated current market value of the seized assets is about Tk 600-700 crore.

Salman, who is currently in jail, has been shown arrested in the cases. The CID earlier arrested Wasur Rahman, managing director and shareholder of Autumn Loop Apparels, a Beximco affiliate, in July.

The CID said its Financial Crime Unit has completed all necessary procedures and submitted charge sheets in all 17 cases in the shortest possible time despite the complex and time-consuming nature of trade-based money laundering investigations.