

Dhaka, Thimphu reaffirm pledge to strengthen ties

STAR REPORT

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus and Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay have reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening cooperation at bilateral, regional, subregional and international levels with a shared goal of promoting peace and prosperity.

They emphasised the importance of advancing regional cooperation through SAARC and BIMSTEC, guided by shared values, mutual respect, understanding and collaboration, according to a joint statement issued yesterday.

At the invitation of the chief adviser, the Bhutanese premier arrived in Dhaka on Friday on a state visit. He is scheduled to leave for Thimphu today.

The two leaders held a bilateral meeting on Saturday, during which both sides signed memoranda of understanding on health cooperation and internet connectivity, and discussed plans to formally begin negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement.

According to the joint statement, the two sides expressed satisfaction over the establishment of a Joint Working Group to facilitate development of the Bhutanese Special Economic Zone in Kurigram.

The leaders also welcomed progress on the transit agreement, noting that a trial shipment from Chatogram Port to Burimari Land Port is nearing completion.

BIDA Executive Chairman Ashik Chowdhury and leaders of BNP, Jamaat and NCP separately called on Tobgay at a city hotel yesterday.

Dhaka again

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India has been sheltering Hasina, who fled there after her ouster in the face of a student-led mass uprising on August 5 the same year.

Right after the ICT verdict on November 17, the Bangladesh foreign ministry called on India to immediately hand over Hasina and former home minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, who was also handed the death penalty in the ruling.

In a statement, the foreign ministry said, "Granting asylum to these convicts... would be extremely unfriendly and an affront to justice," it added.

The interim government had revoked Hasina's diplomatic passport, putting her at risk of extradition. Her extradition falls within the legal framework of the extradition treaty signed between Bangladesh and India in 2013.

According to the treaty that was amended in 2016, "extradition may be refused if the offence for which it is requested is an offence of a political character."

However, it clarifies that certain offences – like murder – "shall not be regarded as offences of a political character" for the purposes of the treaty.

Soon after the verdict was handed down, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said India noted the verdict concerning Hasina.

It said that as a close neighbour, India remains committed to the best interests of the people of Bangladesh, including in peace, democracy, inclusion and stability in that country, and would always engage constructively with all stakeholders to that end.

Meanwhile, the chief prosecutor's office of the ICT is preparing an application for the foreign ministry to seek Interpol assistance for extraditing Hasina and Kamal to Bangladesh, an official of the prosecution said.

Bangladesh on track for LDC

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fragilities, a sluggish investment environment, high inflationary episodes, higher unemployment and poverty and an increasing burden of external debt servicing as uncertainties ahead.

Moreover, the prevailing political uncertainty and the resulting absence of a forward-looking development plan present additional challenges at this stage, said the report, which the graduating countries send to the CDP under the enhanced monitoring process.

The CDP is expected to hold a meeting tomorrow under the Enhanced Monitoring Mechanism (EMM) on graduating LDCs including Bangladesh.

Continued and enhanced support from the international community, including the UN and development partners, is crucial to sustain the development trajectory in the post-LDC era, the report said.

Businesses, including the different business chambers and trade bodies, have already submitted a letter to the government and the UN for deferment of the LDC graduation for Bangladesh, said Anwar Ul-Alam Chowdhury (Parvez), president of the Bangladesh Chamber of Industries.

"We do want the LDC graduation but we are not ready for it yet," said Parvez, also a former president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

The government will have to continue the efforts for graduation preparation as it has a target, said Mohammad Abdur Razzaque, member of the independent assessment team of the UN.

The independent team of the UN has already talked with the government officials and high-ups, local private sector entrepreneurs, leaders of the major political parties, workers, union leaders and independent economists and gathered information to make the final assessment report on Bangladesh's LDC graduation.

Take immediate action to prepare

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armed forces, paramilitary, health sector, local government and city corporations.

Mehedi Ahmed Ansary, a professor at BUET's Department of Civil Engineering, urged the government to start the assessment of the buildings immediately and finish within six to nine months.

The buildings should be categorised into three colours: green, yellow and red. The buildings under the red category should immediately be retrofitted, he said.

"Each building must be individually checked as adjacent buildings can vary in quality. Countries like Japan and India use third party assessments and Bangladesh should do the same. Rajuk alone cannot manage 21 lakh buildings in Dhaka."

The cost of assessment is Tk 2 lakh per six-story building, while retrofitting costs around Tk 50 lakh – far cheaper than dealing with collapses, rescue and loss of life, he added.

Md Bodruddoza Mia, chairman of the Department of Geology at Dhaka University, emphasised early earthquake education, citing the case in Japan, where children are taught in school what to do before, during, and after an earthquake.

He suggested incorporating earth science education at the school and university levels in Bangladesh as the majority of the students do not have the

required knowledge on this.

"Even at Dhaka University during the recent earthquake, students jumped from the fourth floor – this should never happen. Nowhere else in the world do people do this during an earthquake. Lack of knowledge caused this panic."

He suggested establishing a dedicated earthquake research institute in Bangladesh where students could work on seismology with proper incentives.

People are filling lowlands and water bodies, turning them into plots, constructing narrow roads and building large structures beside them, said Md Sirajul Islam, chief town planner of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC).

"But the structural quality is ignored – soil condition, land spanning, and proper design are not considered."

The authorities responsible for monitoring building structures and land development are extremely negligent, he said.

If all 21 lakh buildings in Rajuk areas are considered, around 8.4 lakh could collapse, and even among 6 lakh engineered buildings, around 75,000 would collapse if an earthquake of 7 magnitude strikes, said Abdul Latif Helaly, former chief engineer of Rajuk.

The potential death toll could be 2.1 to 3.1 lakh, with 2 to 5.5 lakh injured, causing direct economic losses of \$25

billion and reconstruction costs of \$62 billion, he said.

Rajuk had assessed 3,252 buildings including schools, colleges and hospitals in 2022 and had recommended the demolition of 42 buildings and the retrofitting of 200 buildings. However, the work is stalled due to project delays, he said.

The city corporation continuously works on disaster preparedness, said Md Sirajul Islam, chief town planner of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC).

For example, through the Resilience Project, DSCC set up an Emergency Operations Centre, the most active centre in Bangladesh.

"Since earthquakes are extremely dangerous and cannot be accurately predicted in advance, our primary responsibility as the media is to raise public awareness and put appropriate pressure on policymakers – this is our main objective," said Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

The Daily Star has published a series of reports on earthquakes. However, after some time, policymakers tend to forget the issues, he said.

"We do not have the expertise to formulate policies like specialists. Our ability lies in delivering information to the public. From this perspective, we request that scholars and journalists work together to take real, effective action."

harvesting units – each consisting of a storage tank, filters, and a distribution line – by December this year.

Project officials said 170,000 units have so far been installed in households and distribution points. The tender process for another 8,000 units is underway.

However, many residents of coastal villages in Satkhira and Khulna have complained of nepotism in the distribution of rainwater harvesting units.

"Rainwater is our only hope, but we have not yet received any tanks to store it," said Shahidul Islam Gazi from Dakhin Kalikapur.

"I feel lucky when the plant isn't crowded as I can return home within an hour... But sometimes the wait drags on for hours."

The physical toll is immense. "Carrying one pitcher on my hip and another in hand causes severe pain. But I must do it. If I don't, my family will have to drink brackish water," said Sathi, whose father is physically challenged. And her mother works in a crab enclosure.

Residents say the water crisis deepened after Cyclone Aila in 2009, when saline water triggered by tidal surges breached embankments and flooded villages. The stagnant water lingered for months, further intensifying salinity in local water sources.

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"However, many people who are in dire need of water also received the units over the past year... Still, the demand for rainwater harvesting units is huge," said one of the officials, seeking anonymity.

Shampa Goswami, executive director of PRERONA, a non-governmental organisation, noted that the shortage of safe drinking water has been aggravated by the absence of long-term planning.

Despite years of work by the government and NGOs, efforts remain fragmented. "Instead of small and scattered projects, the government should lead a comprehensive programme in coordination with all NGOs, enabling marginalised communities to store rainwater and use it throughout the dry season," she said.

Prof Sharmind Neelorme, a climate change expert, said that beyond rainwater harvesting, the southwest region urgently needs a coordinated, integrated solution to its water crisis – one that includes desalination.

"It may be costly, but no expense outweighs the value of human life," she said.

Experts say that large scale investments in rainwater harvesting and community-level desalination could provide sustainable relief, but accurate mapping is essential to ensure that such measures reach the most affected communities.

With the dry season approaching, Hosneara, Sathi, and thousands like them know their daily walk will get longer. The ponds will shrink, the air will carry more salt particles, and the jars they carry will feel heavier.

"Our Khulna and Satkhira correspondents contributed to the report."



Workers unloading fish from a boat at the port city's Karnaphuli Ghat, where trawlers carrying deep-sea catch lined the shore. Once the trawlers are full, the fish are brought by boat to the cold storage, from where they are sent to different parts of the country. The photo was taken yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Officials debate abolishing NTMC

BAHARAM KHAN

Top government officials yesterday weighed whether the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre, long criticised for allegedly enabling the former Awami League government's crackdown on dissent, should be abolished.

The issue surfaced as they discussed key clauses of the draft Bangladesh Telecommunication (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 at a meeting chaired by Home Adviser Jahangir Alam at his ministry, according to at least three officials familiar with the matter.

Planning Adviser Wahiduddin Mahmud, Chief Adviser's Special Assistant Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, and senior officers from the police, Rab, BGB, Ansar, and other agencies were present.

NTMC's technology allows the state to tap any mobile phone in the country, a capability that drew fierce criticism during the AL's tenure over concerns of unaccountable surveillance.

The draft ordinance, prepared by the Posts and Telecommunications Division, raises the possibility of abolishing such an institution altogether.

Taiyeb, who holds the rank of state minister in the division, argued during the meeting that the NTMC should not continue.

He cited alleged unlawful activities by former army officer and NTMC chief Ziaul Ahsan, now under arrest for crimes against humanity.

According to meeting sources, Taiyeb said any phone tapping must require prior court approval.

But senior officers from multiple law enforcement

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16 months on, quake safety

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All the tasks to launch the institute were completed even before the project ended in June 2024, according to Abdul Latif Helaly, former project director of the Urban Resilience Project.

However, the newly built 10-storey facility with two basements remained locked and unused. The high-value equipment has not undergone maintenance for the past 16 months.

According to project documents, 25 categories of advanced devices were purchased for assessing building materials, soil conditions and structural integrity.

These include cyclic and universal testing machines, cross-hole and tri-axial systems, a terrestrial laser scanner with software, parallel seismic instruments, and a pile integrity tester.

Microtremor equipment, rebar scanners, ground penetrating radar, an ultra-pulse velocity machine, diamond core cutters, and truck-mounted CPT equipment, among others, were also procured.

Officials say these devices can test soil strength, determine material quality, and even detect how many reinforcing bars were used in a building beam.

Contacted, former project director Helaly told The Daily Star the institute's lab remains idle despite a lack of approval.

"The assessment devices are fully ready. Once taken to a building, the scanners can detect the number of rods, strands and the concrete strength. Earlier, these tests had to be done manually at BUET," he said.

Stressing that the approval is urgently needed, he said, "With approval, we can immediately resume crucial disaster mitigation work, especially earthquake-related assessments."

Asked about the delay, Rajuk Chairman Reazul Islam told The Daily Star, "We were going ahead with the project. We've done the paperwork

and had sent letters to the ministry previously."

"We are very positive about launching this institute. We sent a letter again on Sunday seeking approval to start the institute," he added.

The institute will be autonomous and run under a trust. The board of trustees has already been restructured, and Rajuk will even provide a cash fund to support the institute's operations, said Reazul.

Urban planner Adil Mohammed Khan said "I believe such an institute is absolutely necessary. It would allow us to quickly identify vulnerable buildings. And with better knowledge about building conditions, public awareness would also increase."

Contacted for comments, the World Bank said the project aimed at strengthening emergency response capacity and advanced disaster-resilient urban planning in Dhaka and Sylhet.

The project established Emergency Operations Centers, improved inter-agency coordination, and laid the groundwork for risk-sensitive land-use planning and electronic building permitting. Swarna Kazi, senior disaster risk management specialist at the global lender, told this newspaper.

"It also built institutional capacity through large-scale drills and training, formed specialised search and rescue teams, and procured modern earthquake resilience tools," she added.

Besides constructing the building and equipping the lab for the institute, the Rajuk had worked with six companies on building vulnerability assessments under the project.

A total of 3,252 buildings belonging to schools, colleges and hospitals were examined. Of these, demolition was recommended for 42 structures, while retrofitting designs for about 200 buildings have already been completed, according to project documents.

Army to extend full support

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Waker said he was pleased to be present at the event, adding that those who fought in the Liberation War earned the country's greatest achievement through their sacrifices.

He described them as the nation's finest sons and thanked them for responding to the army's invitation.

He also expressed gratitude to those who travelled from different parts of the country to join the programme.

The army chief said peacetime assessments have been awarded in the army since 2013 in recognition of courageous and dedicated work at home and abroad.

He congratulated all personnel who received medals for setting bright examples through important and praiseworthy performance in their professional duties.

The army chief said the Bangladesh Army is no longer confined to its own training activities, as it takes part in various social and nation-building programmes and supports the civil administration directly and indirectly.

Waker said Bangladesh Army members have played a distinctive role in global peace by carrying out their responsibilities in peacekeeping missions with professionalism. The army personnel are currently engaged in aid to civil power as part of efforts to maintain law and order, he added.