

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 Chattogram 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.



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 RATHAN

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

SEE PAGE 5 COL 4

Dhaka again

FROM PAGE 1

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

FROM PAGE 1

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

FROM PAGE 1

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 Adil Mohammed Khan, president of the Bangladesh Institute of Planners. "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."

water," he said.

The situation is similar in Shyamnagar and Assasuni upazilas of Satkhira.

"We have so many ponds and canals around us, yet we can't drink water from any of those. The crisis persists throughout the year," said Sathi, a 14-year-old from Paschim Porkatla village in Shyamnagar.

The eighth grader from Burigoalini Darus Sunnat Dakhil Madrasa spends her entire afternoon fetching water from a PSF plant three kilometres away for her four-member family.

Carrying two pitchers, she walks for 30 minutes, then waits in line – sometimes for a couple of hours.

"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.

THE COST OF SURVIVAL

Many residents in these villages buy purified water from vendors. For families living on daily wages, the costs are staggering: Tk 0.50 per litre, or Tk 10 for a 20-litre jar excluding transport costs. By comparison, Dhaka residents pay the Water Supply and Sewerage Authority Tk 16 per 1,000 litres.

"We spend Tk 400 on water a month," said Jahanara from Padmapukur village. "Barely any money is left after buying rice, vegetables, and medicine. Some days, we drink less – not because we want to, but because we have to," said Jahanara, whose husband is a day labourer.

To address salinity and the scarcity of safe drinking water, the government, with assistance from NGOs and donor agencies, has been implementing various projects in the coastal districts through relevant ministries. These include the installation of rainwater harvesting tanks, ROs, and PSFs.

One such initiative is the Safe Water Supply Project in Coastal Areas through a rainwater harvesting system, being implemented by the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) in 10 coastal districts, including Khulna and Satkhira.

Launched in July 2022, the project aims to install 206,872 rainwater

16 months on, quake safety

FROM PAGE 1

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 having modern soil-testing machines due to 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

FROM PAGE 1

Waker said the army stands beside people during natural disasters with sincerity, and it has been possible due to the soldiers' patriotism, competence, discipline, and dedication.

At the beginning of the programme, a summary of the wartime gallantry of the freedom fighter soldiers and the commendable work of the peacetime medal recipients was presented, according to an Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) release.

The release said the army headquarters arranges this reception every year to keep alive the contribution of freedom fighter army members in the country's independence.

Gallantry award recipients, freedom fighter soldiers, their families, senior military officials, army personnel, invited guests, and media representatives attended the event.

The army chief exchanged greetings with the award holders and their families.

He adorned 64 army personnel with peacetime medals in recognition of various acts of valour during the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 financial years. These include 9 Sena Bahini Padak (SBP), 17 Osamanno Sheba Padak (OSP), and 38 Bishishto Sheba Padak (BSP) awardees.

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 medals 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.