

Chiefs of 3 services call on PM Tarique

UNB, Dhaka

The chiefs of the three services paid a courtesy call on Prime Minister Tarique Rahman at the Secretariat yesterday.

Chief of Army Staff General Waker-Uz-Zaman, Chief of Naval Staff Admiral M Nazmul Hassan, and Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Hasan Mahmood Khan met the prime minister at his Cabinet Division office, said Atiqur Rahman Rumon, the prime minister's additional press secretary. Prime Minister's Adviser Brig Gen (ret'd) Dr AKM Shamsul Islam was also present.

The PM also held separate meetings with the directors general of the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and the National Security Intelligence (NSI).

Tarique attended office at the Secretariat for the second consecutive day, travelling from his Gulshan Avenue residence while complying with regular traffic signals. The journey took around 41 minutes, said Atiqur Rahman.

Cabinet Secretary Dr Nasimul Ghani and Principal Secretary ABM Abdus Sattar received the prime minister at the Secretariat.

AL leader dies a day after release on bail

Family alleges negligence by prison authorities

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

A local Awami League leader died at a Dhaka hospital on Wednesday night, a day after being released on bail in what his family described as a critical condition.



Akram Ali

Akram Ali, 50, was vice-president of the Baliadangi upazila unit of the Awami League and former chairman of Barabari Union Parishad, a position he had held for four consecutive terms.

Family members alleged that

SEE PAGE 8 COL 4



The chiefs of the three services -- Chief of Army Staff General Waker-Uz-Zaman, Chief of Naval Staff Admiral M Nazmul Hassan, and Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Hasan Mahmood Khan -- pay a courtesy call on Prime Minister Tarique Rahman at the Secretariat in Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

'Consequences are not good'

Russian FM warns US on Iran strike; White House tells Tehran to make deal

AGENCIES

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in an interview made public on Wednesday, said that any new US strike on Iran would have serious consequences and called for restraint to find a solution to enable Iran to pursue a peaceful nuclear programme.

Lavrov's interview with Saudi Arabia's Al-Arabiya television was aired a day after US and Iranian negotiators held indirect talks in Geneva to head off a new mounting crisis between Washington and Tehran.

"The consequences are not good. There have already been strikes on Iran on nuclear sites under the control of the International Atomic Energy Agency. From what we can judge there were real risks of a nuclear incident," Lavrov said in the interview, which was posted on his ministry's website.

"I am carefully watching reactions in the region from Arab countries, Gulf

- US military poised for strike; Trump yet to decide: report
- US-Iran talks 'don't have much time': IAEA chief
- Iran expected to table written plan to end standoff

monarchies. No one wants an increase in tension. Everyone understands this is playing with fire."

Boosting tensions, he said, could undo the positive steps of recent years, including improved relations between Iran and nearby countries, notably Saudi Arabia.

The White House warned on Wednesday that Iran would be "wise" to do a deal with the United States.

The US military is prepared to strike Iran

as early as this weekend, though President Trump has yet to make a final decision on whether he'll authorize such actions, sources familiar with the matter told CNN.

UN nuclear watchdog chief Rafael Grossi said there was a "step forward" in talks between Iran and the United States after the talks in Geneva, but warned "we don't have much time", reports AFP.

A senior US official told Reuters on Wednesday that Iran was expected to submit a written proposal on how to resolve its standoff with the United States after the talks in Geneva, reports Reuters.

US national security advisers met in the White House on Wednesday and were told all US military forces deployed to the region should be in place by mid-March, the official said.

The United States wants Iran to give up its nuclear programme, and Iran has adamantly refused and denied it is trying to develop an atomic weapon.

India to gradually restore all visa services

Says India's assistant high commissioner

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

All categories of Indian visas will gradually return to normal processing levels, said Aniruddha Das, assistant high commissioner of the Assistant High Commission of India in Sylhet.

"At present, medical and double-entry visas are being issued, and initiatives have been taken to resume travel visas and other categories," he said while exchanging views with journalists at the Sylhet Zilla Press Club on Wednesday.

He assured full cooperation in visa issuance, emphasising its importance in reinforcing ties between the neighbouring countries.

India-Bangladesh relations rest on mutual respect and shared interests, he said, underscoring the role of citizens as central stakeholders in sustaining long-term cooperation.

"The people of both countries will be the principal stakeholders in a stable, positive, constructive, long-term, and mutually beneficial relationship," said Aniruddha.

He also stressed the importance of leveraging geographic proximity, cultural affinities, and economic potential to unlock new opportunities.

"We should transform our geographical and cultural proximity, growing economic capacity and aspirations for the future into new opportunities through mutual cooperation," he added.

Sylhet Zilla Press Club President Moin Uddin presided over the discussion and General Secretary Mohammad Nasir Uddin conducted it. Journalists from various news organisations attended the event.

US to withdraw all troops from Syria: reports

AFP, Washington

The United States is planning to withdraw all of its 1,000 troops from Syria over the next two months, according to US media reports.

Washington will end its presence in the country after the Syrian government extended its control over the country and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces once key to fighting Islamic State (IS) pledged to integrate into the state, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Television network CBS also reported on the plan, citing unnamed US officials.

The decision comes after US forces recently withdrew from some bases in Syria including Al-Tanf and Al-Shadadi, which were used in the US-led international coalition's fight against IS.

Washington has drawn close to Syria's new authorities since the fall of Bashar al-Assad in late 2024, and has transferred thousands of IS fighters from prisons to secure facilities in Iraq.

Government asks UN

FROM PAGE 1

24-27 and that the permanent representative of Bangladesh's mission in New York be instructed by February 23 to present the matter.

The newly formed government, in the letter, argued that an extension would provide vital policy space to stabilise the macroeconomy, consolidate reforms, and complete priority actions under the Smooth Transition Strategy (STS).

It said the five-year preparatory period had been "severely disrupted by a succession of overlapping external and domestic shocks".

These included the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, sluggish global recovery, the Russia-Ukraine war and its impact on energy and food markets, tightening global financial conditions, delays in trade recovery, instability in the Middle East, and growing uncertainty in the global trade regime.

Domestically, the letter cited irregularities in the financial sector, the July 2024 uprising that led to a change in government, and the unresolved repatriation of the Rohingya to Myanmar, which required significant budgetary allocations.

According to the government, these shocks triggered macroeconomic instability, slower GDP growth, elevated inflation, declining private and public investment, a falling tax-GDP ratio, pressure on foreign exchange reserves, reduced imports of capital machinery and raw materials, and weak job creation.

The banking sector and capital markets also faced serious governance and macroeconomic challenges, contributing to a reversal in poverty reduction gains.

As a result, policy focus shifted to short-term stabilisation and crisis management; safeguarding macroeconomic stability, protecting

livelihoods, ensuring food and energy security, and managing balance-of-payments pressures.

This shift left limited fiscal, institutional and political space for graduation-related reforms, the government said. The preparatory period, it said, has therefore not been spent as intended.

The letter further warned of deepening uncertainty over post-LDC trade arrangements.

Concerns include Bangladesh's likely ineligibility for the European Union's GSP+ facility for the ready-made garments sector, the imposition of reciprocal tariffs by the US, evolving bilateral trade arrangements, and new free trade agreements by competing economies.

With exports already showing a downward trend and the country heavily reliant on garments amid persistent energy and infrastructure constraints, premature preference erosion could weaken competitiveness and development momentum, the letter said.

While structural priorities such as customs modernisation, energy reforms, export diversification, compliance infrastructure and operationalisation of key industrial facilities are progressing, they remain behind schedule due to cumulative shocks and the shift in policy, the government noted.

In this context, the government attached particular importance to findings from an independent Graduation Readiness Assessment commissioned by the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UNOHRLLS) at the government's request.

The assessment found the preparatory

period had been "severely disrupted" by cumulative shocks and political upheaval, and raised serious concerns over whether graduation in November 2026 would align with the core UN principle that graduation should not disrupt development progress.

The assessment further indicates that Bangladesh may consider approaching the UN for an extension under the crisis-response provision of the Enhanced Monitoring Mechanism (EMM).

In light of the above considerations, the government said it is of the view that proceeding with graduation under the existing timeline could entail significant risks to macroeconomic stability, export performance, employment, and poverty reduction, thereby undermining the sustainability and irreversibility of graduation.

Responding to whether Bangladesh has the scope to defer graduation, CPD Distinguished Fellow Mustafizur Rahman said the country already meets all three graduation criteria: per capita gross national income (GNI), the Human Asset Index (HAI), and the Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI).

An LDC must meet at least two of the three thresholds - GNI per capita of \$1,306 or above, HAI of 66 or above, and EVI of 32 or below.

Bangladesh first met all three in 2018 and maintained the trend in 2021, when GNI per capita stood at \$1,827, HAI at 75.4, and EVI at 27. In 2024, GNI per capita reached \$2,820.

"There is no question regarding the criteria," Mustafizur said.

Any case for deferral would have to rest on arguments about structural vulnerabilities, he added.

He also noted that a vote would be required at the UN level, and Bangladesh would need the support of at least 51 percent of member states.

'JS without reform council holds no value'

FROM PAGE 12

and undermined the referendum's mandate.

Nahid urged ruling party members to immediately take the oath as members of the Constitution Reform Council and fulfil their constitutional responsibility.

Criticising the new cabinet formed under BNP leadership, Nahid said it lacks inclusivity and fails to reflect the participation of youth, women, or minority groups.

Highlighting that the average age of the new ministers is 60, he said, "We envisioned a youth-driven Bangladesh, and in July it was the strength of youth that guided the nation. But we do not see that reflection in this cabinet."

He also pointed out that nearly 62 percent of ministers and state ministers are businessmen, calling the figure "deeply alarming."

"Being a businessman is not a crime, but representation should be diverse; politicians and people from different professions should be included. When you appoint over 62 percent businessmen as ministers, they will inevitably protect

business interests."

Without naming anyone, Nahid said, "The ministry with the largest budget has been assigned to someone who is a real estate businessman and an accused in a murder case. He was given that ministry purely for financial, business, and corrupt reasons."

Nahid also said that the cabinet is not fully consistent with the expectations of change and reform. "We do not think that this cabinet will be able to prevent corruption. Rather, we think it has been formed with members of a mafia syndicate."

Citing Transparency International Bangladesh, Nahid said 62 percent of BNP MPs are loan defaulters, with outstanding loans amounting to Tk 18,868 crore.

"Prime Minister Tarique Rahman speaks of taking a tough stance against corruption, but when will his own cabinet members and MPs repay their massive debts? The people of Bangladesh want to know."

On Khalilur Rahman's appointment as foreign minister, he said, "It is good to draw on the expertise of professionals,

but such decisions should be based on consensus. People want to know why someone whose resignation the BNP had earlier demanded is now being brought into the cabinet."

He alleged that attempts were being made to open Awami League offices in various locations, which he said would not be possible without the tacit support of the administration. He urged the administration to intervene and halt such initiatives.

Expressing concern over press freedom, Nahid said that since the formation of the new government there have been signs of pressure and interference on the media, mirroring patterns seen during Sheikh Hasina's tenure. He called for ensuring an environment where dissent can be expressed freely.

The NCP convener also urged the government to take effective measures to control prices ahead of Ramadan, stressing that it is the state's responsibility to keep essential commodities within the reach of the public.

US president, UK premier congratulate Tarique

FROM PAGE 1

action to complete the routine defence agreements that would finally give Bangladesh's military access to high-end, American-made equipment.

On February 9, Bangladesh and US signed an agreement on reciprocal trade, while Washington has been seeking to sign two defence agreements with Dhaka - General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisition Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) - to strengthen defence relationship.

In his letter signed on February 18, Trump said on behalf of the American people, he congratulates Tarique on his historic election and wishes him a successful term as the premier of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs shared the letter on X yesterday.

"The partnership between our countries is based on mutual respect and a shared interest in fostering a free and open Indo-Pacific where strong, sovereign nations can prosper," Trump wrote.

He said as Tarique begins his term, he hopes the PM will help him maintain

the "tremendous momentum" in US-Bangladesh trade relationship through the implementation of the Agreement on Reciprocal Trade, which benefits farmers and workers in both of the countries.

Trump looks forward to working with Tarique to make the relationship between the two countries stronger than ever before.

"My Ambassador to Bangladesh, Brent Christensen, has my full confidence. Together, we have an opportunity to make both of our nations more prosperous and secure."

Meanwhile, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has congratulated Tarique on his election victory and becoming the premier, while seeking cooperation to tackle illegal migration, combat the effects of climate change, and strengthen the long-standing defence and security ties.

Stating that the UK and Bangladesh share a close and long-standing relationship, he wrote to Tarique on February 17, "I am confident that under your leadership our collaboration will only grow, building on our shared values and rich history."

The British PM said he looks forward

to working closely with Tarique to strengthen the bilateral partnership and advance shared priorities.

"As one of the largest foreign investors in Bangladesh, we hope to continue to grow our trade and investment relationship."

Starmer said the UK will also continue to support Bangladesh that generously hosts over 1.2 million Rohingya. "I look forward to this next chapter in the partnership between our two countries."

In another development, Switzerland President Guy Parmelin also wrote a congratulatory letter to Tarique, wishing him a successful term in office.

"Your appointment marks an important moment for Bangladesh, and I am confident that your leadership will contribute to the continued progress and development of the country," he wrote.

Parmelin said he looks forward to the prospect of further strengthening the longstanding and constructive relations between the two countries, and to deepening the cooperation across areas of mutual interest.

Family card project to pilot before Eid

FROM PAGE 1

two inter-ministerial meetings held at the Secretariat yesterday.

On the family card initiative, the government plans to target 5 crore families, with priority given to women. The programme will be launched on a pilot basis in eight upazilas, one in each division, before Eid-ul-Fitr, sources said.

To oversee implementation, the Cabinet Division formed a 15-member body, the "Cabinet Committee on the Provision of the Family Card," led by Finance Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury. The committee, comprising ministers, advisers, and secretaries, has been tasked with finalising the selection process, identifying eligible beneficiaries, and ensuring proper rollout. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs will provide secretarial support.

The committee will select the upazilas for the pilot phase, prioritising marginalised and low-income families, sources added. The initiative aims to integrate and streamline existing social safety net programmes.

A preliminary report is expected by February 24, they added.

According to the committee's terms of reference, its responsibilities include designing a framework for

family card management, finalising beneficiary selection, arranging the pilot launch in one upazila per division, reviewing whether existing women's cards can be used as a base, and developing a digital MIS linked to the National ID and National Household Database.

A committee member, speaking anonymously, said global best practices would be reviewed before implementation. "Inclusion errors, exclusion errors, and politically motivated distortions from the past will be addressed to ensure an optimal system," he told this newspaper.

After the meeting, Women and Children Affairs Minister AZM Zahid Hossain said the family card would offer more than double the benefits currently available under existing allowance schemes. "It will be given on a priority basis to women. It will start before Eid. Within six months, we hope coverage will reach 50 percent," he said.

He added that the cards will be delivered directly to recipients using IT-based mechanisms to prevent pilferage.

On the tree plantation drive, the government plans to plant 25 crore trees over the next five years, beginning in May. Sources said this year's target may fall short due to sapling shortages, and officials

from the agriculture and forest departments are assessing available stocks.

"If the 5-crore target cannot be met this year, it will be adjusted next year," Environment, Forest and Climate Change Minister Abdul Awal Mintoo told reporters. Trees will be planted in char areas, along riverbanks, on embankments, in hill tracts, and in the Sundarbans, sources added.

The government also plans to excavate and re-excavate 20,000 kilometres of canals, rivers, and water bodies nationwide. The initial phase is expected to begin in Dhaka, with implementation jointly overseen by the Ministry of Water Resources, the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief.

Earlier in the morning, the prime minister left his Gulshan residence at 8:34am in his personal vehicle. On his way to the Secretariat, his vehicle stopped at four traffic signals like others, where pedestrians applauded and greeted him, prompting the prime minister to wave in response.

Upon arriving at the Secretariat, he inquired which ministers, secretaries, and officials were present at their offices, sources said.