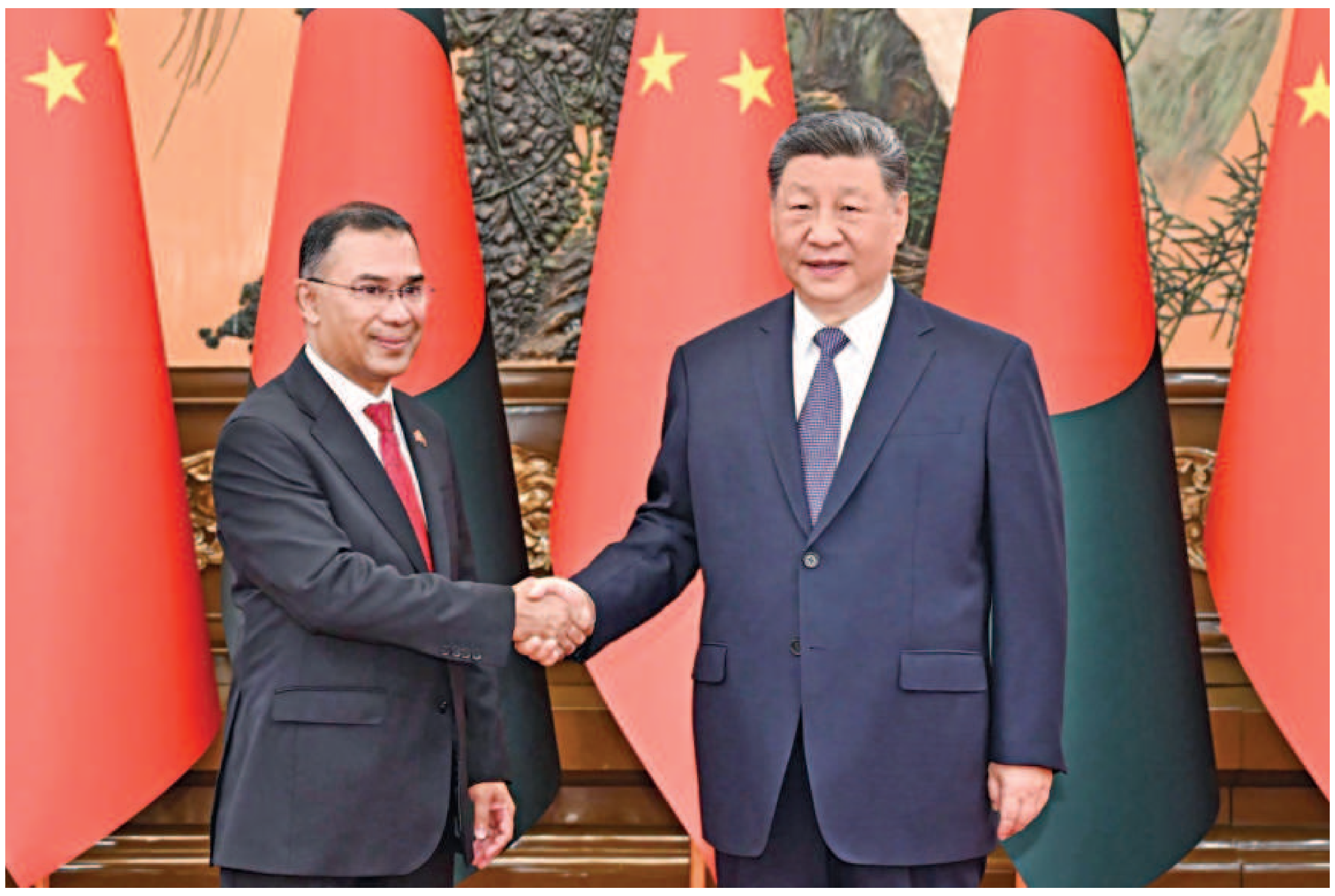

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman and Chinese President Xi Jinping shake hands during a photo session at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Friday.

PHOTO: PID

Death toll in Venezuela quakes nears 1,500

50,000 people remain missing; millions more in need

AFP, *La Guaira*

The death toll in Venezuela's twin earthquake disaster reached 1,430 yesterday, and millions more were feared to lack sanitation and other basic needs as the first US aid flights trickled into Caracas.

Facing public outrage at the response by local officials, US-backed interim Venezuelan leader Delcy Rodriguez said the country was "not alone."

The United States said one runway at Simon Bolivar International Airport was now functioning and that C-17 US military planes were landing there, while a naval ship had arrived off the coast.

The UN humanitarian agency OCHA said search-and-rescue teams from at least 17 countries were being mobilised to help find survivors.

But the search for survivors saw desperate attempts by locals to claw away rubble from apartment buildings that collapsed in Wednesday's double-quakes. Experts say the first 72 hours after natural disasters are the key, narrow window for finding the living.

There was joy in the hardest-hit coastal area of La Guaira, north of Caracas, when locals pulled an infant alive out of the wreckage on Friday, some 32 hours after the magnitude 7.2 and 7.5 tremors.

In one social media video, a man welled up in tears as he held the baby in his arms.

The United Nations' migration agency said it had examined available population and damage data and had determined that "up to 6.76 million people could be affected," and would "require emergency shelter, safe water, sanitation and hygiene services, healthcare, protection support and essential relief items."

National Assembly President Jorge Rodriguez yesterday said 1,430 people have confirmed dead and 3,238 injured, while the UN estimated $6.7 billion in physical damage -- equivalent to six percent of Venezuela's GDP.

UN aid chief Tom Fletcher on Friday told AFP the death toll could continue to soar, adding that more than 50,000 people were missing.

The government restricted access to La Guaira state on Friday, also announcing a military deployment to the disaster zone.

Venezuela's worst earthquake in more than a century has come after the oil-rich country endured more than a decade of economic collapse.

The crisis has hollowed out hospitals and public services, driving millions to leave the country.

And the country is still in a fragile political transition six months after the US ouster of Maduro.

"Even before the earthquakes, millions of people across Venezuela were facing food insecurity, collapsing health services, protection risks, and limited access to basic services," the UN and other aid agencies said in a statement Friday.

Earthquakes of similar magnitude claimed more than 200,000 lives in Haiti in January 2010 and 73,000 lives in Kashmir in October 2005.

Govt secures $3.11b from dev partners

FROM PAGE 1

International financial institutions, including the IMF, WB and ADB, warned that import-dependent economies such as Bangladesh would face mounting external pressures.

In response, the government formed a committee in March to assess the likely economic impact of the conflict. Based on its findings, Bangladesh sought emergency budget support from development partners.

The finance ministry prepared a position paper in this regard, requesting an additional $3 billion in rapid-disbursing assistance to address urgent balance-of-payments needs and growing budgetary pressures during the final four months of FY2025-26.

The paper described the Middle East conflict as an external and temporary terms-of-trade shock that had sharply increased the country's import bills for fuel, LNG, fertiliser and food, while adding pressure on subsidies and social protection spending.

The war created a "time-critical external financing need that cannot be met prudently through rapid reserve drawdown or disruptive import compression", the paper said.

It estimated that Bangladesh would require an additional Tk 385.42 billion (around $3.2 billion) in subsidies between March and June.

The ministry also noted that foreign exchange reserves had fallen from $30.36 billion at the end of February to $29.39 billion by March 25 under the IMF's balance of payments methodology, reflecting tighter external financing conditions.

According to the paper, the emergency financing would help preserve reserves while ensuring continued imports of fuel, LNG, fertiliser and food, create fiscal space for targeted and time-bound support, and reduce the risk of a disorderly adjustment.

The government also pledged to use existing public financial management systems and ensure transparent reporting on the use of the funds and related emergency spending.

The paper said any price-smoothing measures and subsidies supported by the financing would be temporary, progressively better targeted, and implemented alongside continued reforms to strengthen revenue mobilisation, prioritise public spending and improve the foreign exchange market.

Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves stood at $31.53 billion under the IMF methodology on June 25.

Announcing the latest $1.1 billion package yesterday, the WB said in a statement that the financing would support two projects aimed at helping Bangladesh cope with fertiliser and fuel price volatility, strengthen food security and improve emergency response capacity.

The package includes $300 million for food security and $713 million under a contingent emergency response component to finance quick-disbursing expenditures during crises.

The emergency financing will support cash transfers and livelihood assistance for affected households and micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), helping stabilise incomes and protect jobs.

It will also finance fuel and energy supplies needed to maintain essential services, including food distribution, healthcare, electricity and water supply, the WB said.

The funds under the emergency response component are expected to be disbursed by June 30.

Jean Pesme, WB country director for Bangladesh and Bhutan, said in the statement that rising food, fertiliser and fuel prices, combined with tighter fiscal conditions, had hit small farmers and vulnerable households the hardest.

"The World Bank has stepped up with immediate support to help Bangladesh mitigate this impact, ensure fertiliser supply for rice production, protect households, jobs and livelihoods, and maintain essential services," he said.

The $300 million food security project will finance imports of 6 lakh tonnes of fertiliser, including 5 lakh tonnes of urea, enough to support rice cultivation on about 1.4 million hectares during the Aman (July-October 2026) and Boro (October 2026-April 2027) seasons.

Bangladesh imports more than 85 percent of its fertiliser requirements.

Souleymane Coulibaly, WB lead economist and task team leader, said the Aman and Boro seasons account for about 90 percent of the country's annual rice production.

"Any disruption in fertiliser supply would not only threaten food security, but it would also deepen poverty and cost jobs," he said.

Lesley Jeanne Yu Cordero, WB lead disaster risk management specialist and task team leader, said the project would repurpose unutilised financing from existing projects to channel resources quickly to the areas of greatest need.

Bangladesh-China ties enter a 'new era'

FROM PAGE 1

Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang, as well as Zhao Leji, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.

He also attended the World Economic Forum's Summer Davos meeting and the Bangladesh Investment Forum and held talks with senior Chinese policymakers, financial institutions, and business leaders.

'HISTORIC STATE VISIT'

At a press briefing at the foreign ministry yesterday, Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman described Tarique's trip to China as a "historic".

"The relationship has been elevated from a comprehensive, strategic, cooperative partnership to a China-Bangladesh community with a shared future, which is the highest level of bilateral relationship for China," he said.

The two countries will now hold regular strategic dialogues at the foreign ministry level and explore "Two-Plus-Two" mechanisms to coordinate foreign policy and security.

"This is critical in a world of evolving geopolitics," he said.

President Xi Jinping also offered a strong and positive message on future relations. "No matter how the world changes, China will not waver in its commitment to the overall direction of China-Bangladesh friendly relations and will always be a trustworthy good friend, good neighbour and good partner of Bangladesh," Xi said.

Analysts believe Tarique's decision to prioritise China during his early overseas engagements reflects Dhaka's intention to strengthen ties with Asian powers while maintaining balanced relations with the West.

Bangladesh reaffirmed its commitment to the "One China Policy", reiterating that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and opposing any form of "Taiwan independence".

The two countries agreed to deepen cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), strengthen regional connectivity, and coordinate more closely in multilateral platforms.

BANGLADESH JOINS GDI

Bangladesh, which joined the BRI in 2016, also signed an MoU under China's flagship Global Development Initiative (GDI) to cooperate in education, healthcare, human resources development, and the teaching of Mandarin in Bangladeshi schools.

China also welcomed Bangladesh's aspiration to participate in BRICS and supported its application to become a partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The joint communiqué stated that both countries would continue supporting multilateralism, the UN-centred international order, and inclusive economic globalisation.

TRADE, INVESTMENT

Bangladesh currently faces a large trade imbalance with China, its largest trading partner. Although bilateral trade between the two countries is worth $24 billion annually, Bangladesh exports only about $1 billion.

Officials said discussions focused on reducing the gap by expanding Bangladesh's manufacturing capacity and diversifying exports.

Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) Chairman Ashik Chowdhury said the visit produced major progress in infrastructure and industrial cooperation, particularly regarding the Chinese Economic and Industrial Zone in Chattogram, and Mongla Port modernisation and expansion.

Ashik added Bangladesh and China reached an agreement to establish a Chinese Industrial Park on around 150 acres adjacent to the Mongla Port modernisation project.

He noted Chinese investors expressed interest in several sectors, including renewable energy, textiles and garments, electronics, healthcare, medical devices, automobiles, recycling, and oil and gas.

Ashik added that separate meetings were held with Chinese companies regarding energy infrastructure projects related to gas, coal, and LNG imports to support Bangladesh's growing power demand.

The two sides discussed relocating Chinese factories to Bangladesh in sectors where the country has an adequate labour force and technical capability.

Bangladesh welcomed China's zero-tariff treatment for all Bangladeshi exports and pledged to improve the investment climate for Chinese investors.

TEESTA WATER MANAGEMENT

China agreed to support Bangladesh's Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project, along with broader cooperation in flood prevention, river dredging, hydrological forecasting, and irrigation systems.

The Teesta water-sharing agreement between Bangladesh and India has remained unresolved since 2011 due to opposition from West Bengal.

Khalilur said China has agreed to conduct a feasibility study for the Teesta project.

Responding to Indian concerns, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said China-Bangladesh cooperation "does not target any third party".

China also offered technical training for Bangladeshi experts in river management, flood control, and inland water transport systems.

CHINA-MYANMAR-BANGLADESH CORRIDOR

Regional connectivity also emerged as a major focus during the visit, particularly discussions surrounding the China-Myanmar-Bangladesh Economic Corridor (CMBEC).

Officials said the proposed corridor could significantly improve regional trade, transport, and industrial connectivity by linking south-western China with Bangladesh through Myanmar.

Discussions also covered multimodal transport systems and regional logistics cooperation under the BRI framework.

ROHINGYA ISSUE, PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE TIES

China pledged continued support in facilitating dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar for Rohingya repatriation.

The foreign minister said the government plans to pursue more active diplomatic engagement with Myanmar while using China's influence to advance negotiations.

China also offered cooperation in healthcare, including robotic surgery, hospital development, and easier medical visa procedures for Bangladeshis.

The two countries further agreed to increase exchanges involving the media, think tanks, youth programmes, sports, and culture as part of broader people-to-people engagement.

'BANGLADESH FIRST'

Tarique in parliament affirmed that he pursued a "Bangladesh First" policy and prioritised the interests of the people.

"In my capacity, I have sought to speak for the interests of the nation and its people and to protect those interests," Tarique told the House.

Expressing gratitude for the thanks motion, he noted that he does not view this recognition as a personal achievement.

"If there is any positive outcome, it is Bangladesh's achievement. If the people have gained anything through this visit, that gain belongs to them," he added.

Tiny Cape Verde craft towering tale

FROM PAGE 1

World Cup can offer. Iran's campaign, overshadowed by political issues beyond football, has also drawn global attention.

Yet beyond the familiar rhythm of favourites advancing and superstars shining, there is one story that best captures the spirit of this World Cup: Cape Verde.

In an era when football is increasingly measured by money, infrastructure and market size, Cape Verde's rise is a reminder that success is not determined solely by geography, population or economic weight.

Spread across 10 islands in the Atlantic, Cape Verde covers just 4,033 square kilometres and has a population of about 561,900. Its economy is largely service-driven, anchored by tourism, and produces a GDP of roughly USD 2.77 billion. By conventional measures, it is a nation that should struggle to compete with football's established powers.

Instead, Cape Verde have become history-makers.

The Blue Sharks are now the smallest nation ever to reach the knockout stage of a World Cup. Ranked 64th before the tournament, they finished second in Group H ahead of Saudi Arabia and two-time world champions Uruguay, securing progression with three draws, including a memorable goalless draw against pre-tournament favourites Spain and a courageous 2-2 stalemate with Uruguay. Their reward is a meeting with defending champions Argentina.

More significantly, they have challenged long-held assumptions about what defines progress in international football, showing that structure, continuity and clarity of method can matter as much as resources.

The Cape Verdean Football Federation (FCF) deserves immense credit for recognising and harnessing one of its greatest assets: its diaspora. Successive droughts and economic hardship over the last century has left sizeable Cape Verdean communities in Portugal, the Netherlands and beyond, particularly in Rotterdam, and the FCF has turned that reality into an advantage. Fourteen members of the 26-man squad were born outside the country, including six from Rotterdam, allowing Cape Verde to combine national identity with European football education.

Continuity has mattered just as much. Coach Bubista, a former Cape Verde centre-back, has been in charge since January 2020, given time to build a compact, disciplined side that blends defensive organisation with technical assurance.

This is the same group that upset Ghana and held Egypt en route to the Africa Cup of Nations quarterfinals, a decade after their tournament debut, and had nearly made the cut in the 2022 edition. Their defensive discipline has been striking. Against Spain, they committed just one foul throughout the match -- the fewest by any team in a World Cup fixture since 1966. Veteran goalkeeper Vozinha, now 40, produced seven saves in that match and again proved decisive in subsequent games.

"We always train and play as a unit," has become the defining philosophy of the Blue Sharks.

That unity was evident in Houston yesterday (Bangladesh time), where players huddled around a mobile phone awaiting confirmation of Spain's result before celebrating. In the stands, supporters embraced, danced and wept as a nation of just over half a million secured its place among football's top 32.

Cape Verde's emergence has also become the most persuasive argument in favour of FIFA's expanded 48-team World Cup. Critics warned that expansion would dilute quality; instead, it has widened football's narrative, creating space for stories that might otherwise never surface.

As former England defender Gary Neville put it: "I think those sceptics who thought expanding the World Cup wasn't the right thing might be rethinking it watching these Cape Verde fans, because this is really special. A country of 500,000 people getting to the knockout phase. We've seen Uruguay, one of the biggest countries, going out and then one of the smallest teams making it. What a moment for them."

Football, indeed, belongs not only to the elite but also to those willing to dream, plan and persevere.

Cape Verde's achievement is not a fairy tale built on chance. It is the product of of vision, organisation and belief.

For Bangladesh's football-loving millions, their journey poses a sharper question: if a country of barely half a million can reach football's biggest stage through structure and clarity of purpose, what holds others back?

In a tournament filled with familiar giants and celebrated names, Cape Verde may yet leave behind the biggest lesson.

Katabon tower fire kills two

FROM PAGE 1

After being informed around 1:05am, officials from the Fire Service and Civil Defence reached the spot around 1:30am. Six fire service units brought the blaze under control after about two hours.

Firefighters rescued the two victims in critical condition around 3:10am. Salam was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, where doctors declared him dead, while Jony was declared dead at the National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery.

Morgue sources said they both died of smoke inhalation.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Noman said the 12th floor housed four flats -- three used as law chambers and one residential unit, which was locked during the fire.

"The property belonged to the late AF Hassan Ariff, a distinguished lawyer and former adviser to the interim government. Of the four flats, two were owned by his son, Muaaz Ariff, and the other two by his daughter, Ummehani Binte Ariff."

Muaaz used one of the flats as his law chamber and another as his residence, Noman said, adding that he paid rent to Ummehani. Deceased Jony worked as an office assistant in Muaaz's chamber.

Noman also said the two victims, who were trapped inside the building, had appealed for rescue over their mobile phones before contact was lost.

He said his chamber in unit D-1 on the 12th floor was completely destroyed and claimed that CCTV footage from outside the chamber went missing shortly before the fire.

"My office assistant called me at 12:57am to say the chamber was on fire. But the CCTV system shows 'no record' from 12:27am onward."

Noman added that the camera system was either damaged in the fire or its memory card had been removed before the blaze started.

He also questioned whether the fire could have been caused by an electrical short circuit or another accident.

"There is no cooking in the chamber. The employees do not smoke. No mosquito coil is used, and even the air conditioner was not running at night."

He alleged that the fire started near the main entrance, blocking the exit and trapping the two employees.

Noman recalled Salam's final call before it disconnected: "Sir, save me. The chamber is on fire. I can't get out."

Witnesses said that after trying to call for help before their phone lines went dead, the victims took shelter in a bathroom in an attempt to survive. They were rescued from there after the fire was brought under control.

Noman alleged that there had been an ongoing dispute over ownership of the flats.

On January 30, Ummehani filed a general diary with New Market Police Station over the dispute.

Speaking to The Daily Star, she claimed that her brother, Muaaz, was trying to occupy the flats she owned, including the one that was gutted in the fire.

Muaaz, however, said the fire was accidental. "If there is any suspicion of sabotage, police should investigate."

He added that he lives in one of the flats with his family and evacuated when the fire broke out.

Regarding the missing CCTV footage, Muaaz claimed there had been internet connectivity issues in the building for several days, which may have disrupted the CCTV system.

Meanwhile, New Market Police Station OC Ayub said it was too early to determine the cause of the fire.

"The Fire Service has not yet said anything about the cause either. Whether it was an accidental fire or an act of sabotage will be investigated."

Fire Service Assistant Director Kazi Nazimuzzaman said the building lacked a fire safety system and that commercial chambers were being operated in a residential building in violation of regulations.

"We are still trying to determine the cause of the fire."