Ukraine warns of tough winter as Russia strikes kill 4 in Kyiv region

AFP, *Belgrade*

President Volodymyr Zelensky warned yesterday, during a visit to Belgrade, that Ukraine was facing a winter with basically no working thermal power plants as overnight Russian strikes left four dead, including a child, in the Kyiv region.

Speaking alongside his Serbian counterpart, Aleksandar Vucic, the Ukrainian leader said Moscow's latest overnight attacks and shelling of frontline communities combined had killed 13 people in the last 24 hours.

"Russian missiles are aimed precisely at making the lives of Ukrainians unbearable," Zelensky told reporters during his first official visit to Belgrade, highlighting that the attacks often target Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

Ukraine was left with "virtually no intact thermal power plants" as it braced for the upcoming heating season, Zelensky said. Those plants are important complements to the nuclear energy which also feeds its grid.



Prime Minister Tarique Rahman addresses an event organised on the occasion of the 37th founding anniversary of the Doctors Association of Bangladesh at the LD Hall of Jatiya Sangsad yesterday morning. PHOTO: PID

Hamas says still ready to go ahead with Gaza plan

AFP, *Gaza City*

Hamas yesterday said it remained ready to proceed with a US-backed Gaza peace plan and urged pressure on Israel, which insists it did not agree to the latest part of the deal.

Hamas informed US President Donald Trump's Board of Peace that it stood by the latest stage of the plan, under which the militants would hand over weapons to a nascent Palestinian governing committee in the war-battered territory.

"Hamas and other factions have confirmed to mediators their readiness to begin implementing the agreement and move to the second phase, provided it receives Israeli approval and that Israel begins implementing the agreement," a Hamas official told AFP.

"Hamas is urging the US administration to exert pressure on Israel to compel it to abide by the agreement and move to the second phase," the official said on condition of anonymity.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who faces a tough reelection fight in October and wide opposition from his right-wing base to the Gaza deal, said on Tuesday that Israel had not agreed to the "draft" presented by the Board of Peace.

Trump last week had hailed as a breakthrough that Hamas had agreed to disarmament under the plan, with the Board of Peace saying Israel would in tandem carry out a phased withdrawal from much of Gaza.

Govt may allow pvt firms to import fuel, sell in retail

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on May 24 sought permission from the energy ministry to directly import and market large quantities of refined fuel.

The company sought permission to import 15-20 lakh tonnes of diesel, 2 lakh tonnes of octane, 1.5 lakh tonnes of petrol and 8-10 lakh tonnes of furnace oil annually. That would amount to as much as 33.5 lakh tonnes of refined fuel a year.

Bangladesh's annual fuel oil demand is about 74 lakh tonnes, according to BPC data. In fiscal 2024-25, BPC imported 46.1 lakh tonnes of refined petroleum products.

The proposed volumes would represent a sizeable private sector entry into a market that BPC currently supplies largely through imports and domestic refining. The proposal comes as the government is already signalling a broader shift towards private participation in the energy sector.

At a programme on July 22, Energy Minister Iqbal Hassan Mahmood Tuku said the government was planning to allow private companies to import petroleum products in an effort to reduce the subsidy burden.

Three other private entities had earlier expressed interest in having larger roles in oil refining, but none sought to import refined fuel, The Daily Star has learnt from officials familiar with the proceedings.

Several private companies operate small-scale refineries in Bangladesh, but these facilities have traditionally processed locally sourced condensate rather than imported crude.

Bashundhara wants to import the products under its own management and sell and market them through its own arrangements as well as through the government's oil marketing companies.

It also says it has approval for 388 filling stations and sought permission to establish those stations and convert LPG/autogas stations into modern fuel stations.

Bashundhara's latest proposal is also materially different from the company's earlier initiative involving petroleum products.

In 2024, Bashundhara obtained permission related to importing crude, refining it, and marketing the products.

Its latest application seeks permission to import refined petroleum products directly and market them in Bangladesh.

The energy division sought the BPC's opinion on Bashundhara's application in a letter dated July 11.

The BPC subsequently formed an 11-member committee, including its senior officials and the managing directors of Padma, Meghna and Jamuna, on July 14.

The committee was asked to examine the legal basis of the proposal, the import quantities, the marketing arrangements, and the possible impact on BPC and Padma, Meghna, and Jamuna oil companies.

It was also asked to assess the proposal from the perspectives of fuel security, supply diversification, and the development of a competitive market.

The committee was given only two working days to submit its recommendations.

The BPC subsequently sent its response to the energy division on July 21, "objecting to the proposal" while noting that the ultimate decision rested with the government, a BPC official said, requesting not to be named.

However, on August 6, the energy division instructed the BPC to prepare a draft policy by tomorrow.

Tuku yesterday told The Daily Star that they want private companies to import refined petroleum products alongside the BPC to introduce competition and reduce the possibility of the state being held hostage by a single buyer or supplier.

He said, "We want private companies to bring [fuel] alongside us so that there is fair competition... We want to get out of the monopoly."

Tuku said the initiative was not intended to benefit any particular company and that the government had received applications from several firms.

The minister said the proposed framework was still at an early stage and had not received approval from the government's economic affairs committee or the cabinet.

He said the proposal would first be examined to determine whether it was feasible.

The energy division yesterday issued a statement defending the proposed policy after receiving flak from a section of the media and the opposition party.

It said the framework would seek to establish a transparent and competitive system and allow private-sector infrastructure and investment capacity to complement the existing government system, particularly during emergencies or crises.

It said the policy would only be considered if public interest, energy security, competition, transparency and accountability could be ensured. "There is no scope to provide special benefits to any particular individual, organisation or group through this policy."

M Shamsul Alam, energy adviser to the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, criticised the fast-paced process.

"The BPC was initially given two days to provide its opinion on the private company's proposal and was subsequently asked to prepare a broader guideline within four days.

"We have seen in the past how vested groups can have their interests secured at lightning speed."

Major changes in a key sector such as energy require proper assessment, consultation, and institutional scrutiny, rather than being hurried through within days.

Referring to the government's rationale that greater private sector participation would reduce the subsidy burden, Shamsul said, "This is not a realistic or evidence-based argument. Private operators would seek to maximise profits, which could ultimately increase costs and consumer prices rather than reduce them."

He also questioned whether Bangladesh's regulatory institutions have the capacity to effectively oversee private companies operating in such a strategically important sector.

"You cannot hand over a sector to private hands simply by relying on regulation," he said, arguing that an effective regulatory framework and competent institutions would have to be in place first.

Weak state oversight can allow irregularities to occur at the hands of the government or private companies.

A cushion for those struggling to get by

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High-level priority for the scheme was reinforced at a recent cabinet committee meeting chaired by Finance Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, where senior officials reviewed its progress.

For nationwide surveys, data collection and administrative costs,the programme has a Tk 2,400 crore commitment, with Tk 900 crore coming from the World Bank's Social Protection for Inclusion, Resilience, Innovation and Transformation programme, and Tk 1,500 crore from the government.

The programme will formally be launched on August 16 in Kishoreganj and then gradually expanded to every upazila and union by late October, depending on the success and efficiency of the survey.

Before the inauguration by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, new software and an app developed from the survey database will undergo a trial run among families in Ward 8 of Latifabad Union in Kishoreganj.

The government plans to make the Family Card the cornerstone of its social protection system, expanding its coverage over the coming years.

According to a presentation at the cabinet committee meeting, the programme will cover 41 lakh families in 2026-27 fiscal year, 81 lakh in 2027-28 and 1.21 crore in 2028-29, before reaching its target of 1.61 crore households by 2029-30.

Under the restructured welfare system, payments will be made exclusively in the name of the eldest female member of each eligible household.

Officials say the arrangement is intended to strengthen women's decision-making power within families and encourage spending on household nutrition.

To prevent duplicate registrations across government agencies, technical teams at the ICT Division are linking the National Identification numbers and birth registration records of family members to create a unified digital family profile.

Payments will be made through a dual-interface smart chip card integrated with TakaPay, Bangladesh's national retail payment infrastructure.

Beneficiaries will be able to withdraw the money through commercial bank terminals and ATMs nationwide.

Distribution will be handled through 3,072 designated branches of three state-owned banks -- Sonali Bank, Bangladesh Krishi Bank and Janata Bank.

Eligibility will be determined using a Proxy Means Test scoring model based on national household income and expenditure survey data collected by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

The system will classify households into five income tiers and automatically enrol those in the bottom three.

A household will be deemed ineligible if any member receives a government pension, holds a regular government or state-affiliated job, pays income tax, has savings certificates worth more than Tk 5 lakh, owns a registered four-wheeler, or possesses more than half an acre of arable or commercial land.

For the baseline field survey, the administration is deploying 66,815 enumerators under the supervision of 6,681 field supervisors. Interest in the jobs has been high, with 4,69,103 applications submitted for enumerator positions through 583 social welfare offices nationwide.

Enumerators will receive Tk 165 for each household surveyed, while supervisors will be paid Tk 30 for each entry.

In Galachipa, scrutiny of applications is underway and 103 enumerators will be appointed, said an official of the upazila administration.

Unlike conventional census projects conducted solely by the BBS, the Family Card survey involves local administration and social service officials at every level.

Divisional commissioners, district administrators and UNOs have been tasked with overseeing field activities, while officials of the Department of Social Services have been appointed coordinators at divisional, district and unit levels.

"Field officers are treating the project with the utmost urgency under strict instructions issued to union-level authorities," said Mohammad Shaheed Hossain Chowdhury, deputy commissioner of Patuakhali.

Field staff will collect information through a paperless mobile system that requires live location tagging, photographs documenting living conditions and digital signatures, said Abdur Rashhid Khan, deputy director of the Patuakhali Social Services Department.

The collected data will be screened by AI-powered auditing software to flag discrepancies between reported income and living conditions. Supervisory teams will then recheck 5-10 percent of surveyed households to verify the information.

The survey aims to collect data on 4.45 crore families.

Under the pilot launched in March, data on 1,09,679 families were collected from selected areas across the country.

Nearly 77,000 were initially found eligible, but around 6,000 were later excluded after officials found pensioners, government employees or other disqualifying criteria among the family members.

In effect, the pilot successfully covered about 92 percent of the selected families.

For Tanjila and many other women of coastal Char Biswas union, the monthly payment has become a small but dependable cushion against the uncertainty of life in a climate-vulnerable community.

"The Family Card support is a great source of security for poor families like ours. We use the money to meet urgent household needs and save Tk 500 every month for the future, especially for times when storms or floods prevent us from earning.

"Our son is in primary school. We also save some money for him so that we can meet the costs of his education," she said.

Profiteers of fascism out to disrupt energy sector

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The prime minister was speaking at a rally organised to mark the 37th founding anniversary of the Doctors Association of Bangladesh (DAB) at the LD Hall of the Jatiya Sangsad complex.

Tarique said unplanned projects and decisions taken by previous governments had left the power and energy sector in a fragile state, while the present government was working to address the resulting crises.

"The government is not denying that people are currently facing crises of electricity, gas and fuel. But the country, its people and the government are now paying for those unplanned schemes to provide special benefits to certain quarters," he said.

The government was formulating plans to gradually ease the gas, electricity and fuel crises, he said.

The prime minister also said the government had decided to recruit 1 lakh new health workers to raise public awareness about primary healthcare and urged doctors to train them properly.

He said the government believed in prevention rather than waiting for diseases to develop before seeking treatment.

On political involvement by students and professionals, Tarique said political awareness or organisation was not unreasonable in a democratic state, but excessive political involvement should not interfere with professional responsibilities.

Addressing the doctors, he said several proposals they had submitted to improve healthcare services would be considered in phases.

The proposals include recruiting 5,000 doctors through a special BCS examination, raising the age limit for doctors entering government service from 32 to 34, increasing their retirement age from 61 to 65, providing incentives for doctors working in remote areas and establishing specialised hospitals outside Dhaka.

Tarique said the government had already begun plans to establish specialised hospitals, including children's hospitals, outside the capital.

Earlier, Tarique and his wife, Dr Zubaida Rahman, planted neem and arjun saplings on the LD Hall premises before inaugurating the rally by hoisting the national and party flags and releasing balloons and pigeons.

DAB President Prof Dr Harun Al Rashid presided over the rally. BNP Secretary General and LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, Social Welfare Minister Abu Zafar Md Zahid Hossain, Health Minister Sardar Md Sakhawat Husain and DAB Secretary General Dr Md Zahirul Islam Shakil, among others, attended the programme.

Jamaat to join presidential race

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The meeting has been scheduled for 11:30am at the official residence of Jamaat Ameer and Opposition Leader Shafiqur Rahman on Minto Road, according to a separate press note issued late last night.

Contacted, Saiful Alam Khan Milon, a member of Jamaat's central executive council and the lawmaker from Dhaka-12, appeared to suggest that Jamaat was looking to field a candidate who would have broad public acceptance.

"We will field a very good candidate, InshaAllah. It will be a befitting candidate whom the nation will accept," he said.

Asked why Jamaat was participating despite the ruling party's parliamentary majority making the election outcome largely predictable, Milon said the party would not base its decision on the ruling party's position.

"The ruling party will do its job, and we are doing ours," he said.

Jamaat's press release added that the meeting also discussed the overall political situation in the country, constitutional reform and various programmes announced by the 11-party alliance, the release said.

Meanwhile, alliance partner National Citizen Party (NCP) had not yet decided whether to participate in the presidential election.

"Discussions are still under way. We have a meeting on Sunday [today], and we will be able to confirm our position after that," Member Secretary Akhter Hossen told The Daily Star last night.

Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis, another partner in the alliance, has no plan to field a candidate.

The issue was not discussed at the party's monthly meeting of its central committee held yesterday, Secretary General Jalaluddin Ahmad said last night.

Asked about his personal view, Jalaluddin said the party has no intention of fielding a presidential candidate.

Pointing to the BNP's two-thirds majority in parliament, he said, "You know who the voters are in this election. The members of parliament are the voters. So what's the point of fielding a candidate?"

He went on to say he expected the 11-party alliance to eventually decide against fielding a candidate.

According to the Election Commission's announced schedule, August 13 is the deadline for submitting nomination papers for the presidential election.

Nomination papers will be scrutinised on August 16. If there is only one valid candidate, the Election Commission will declare that candidate elected.

Under the constitution, only members of parliament can vote in a presidential election. With the BNP holding an overwhelming majority in the current parliament, its nominee is considered the most likely to become president, although the party has yet to officially announce a candidate.

Mohammed Shahabuddin resigned as president on July 24, after which Speaker Hafiz Uddin Ahmed assumed the duties of acting president.

The constitution requires a new president to be elected within 90 days of the office falling vacant.