‘Act against non-cooperating officials’

JS panel seeks probe into slow-moving projects

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The parliamentary standing committee on the public administration ministry has recommended identifying officials responsible for non-cooperation or negligence in implementing government work.

The committee also asked for action against such officials, and an inquiry into slow-moving projects under the ministry, taking their budget allocations into account.

The recommendations came at the committee’s first meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban yesterday, with its Chairman Sayeed Ahmed in the chair, the Parliament Secretariat said in a statement.

The committee advised officials to coordinate their work at the field level to implement the ruling BNP’s 31-point reform agenda. It also asked for action against those failing to cooperate with the government’s efforts to implement its “Bangladesh First” policy.



CNG-run auto-rickshaws stand in a line in front of a filling station at Bahaddarhat of Chattogram city. Low gas pressure has resulted in many vehicles getting less than their required fuel. The photo was taken yesterday. PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Man dies after being beaten over ‘hurting religious sentiments’

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Satkhira*

A 30-year-old man was beaten to death by a mob in Satkhira’s Debhata on Tuesday night over allegations that he had hurt religious sentiments, police said yesterday.

The victim was Wahiduzzaman Shamim, son of Shamsur Rahman of Chhota Shanta village in the upazila.

HM Shaheen, officer-in-charge of Debhata Police Station, said an audio clip purportedly containing Shamim’s remarks went viral on social media on Tuesday morning.

That evening, a group of people began beating up Shamim in the Sakhipur area. On information, police rescued Shamim and took him to the local upazila health complex.

Around 9:00pm, another group of people entered the hospital and beat up Shamim again, the OC said. As his condition deteriorated, he was referred to Satkhira Medical College Hospital, where doctors declared him dead around 1:00am yesterday.

Speaking to reporters, Shamim’s elder brother Abdul Jalil said Shamim obtained a master’s degree from Jagannath University.

Jalil claimed that about a year ago, Shamim fell victim to a gang that allegedly drugged and robbed him, locally known as an “Ogyan Party”, while he was returning home from Dhaka. Since then, a change in Shamim’s behaviour had been noticed, he said.

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Houthi attack sparks fire at KSA Aramco facility

MBS rejects Israeli request to join anti-Houthi fight

AGENCIES

Powerful explosions rattled the Saudi capital yesterday, hours after a Houthi strike hit a building in the area housing energy giant Aramco’s operations centre, in a fresh escalation of the war between the kingdom and the Yemeni group.

The civil defence agency said four people -- two women, a man and a child -- were wounded by debris from two intercepted Houthi cruise missiles and that 15 homes were damaged.

The Saudi-led coalition meanwhile struck oil sites across western Yemen, with spokesman Turki Al-Malki saying the attacks targeted facilities used to supply the Houthis’ effort to “threaten the kingdom, Yemen, the southern Red Sea and waterways”.

Yesterday, the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis said it had intercepted a missile fired by the group towards Riyadh. In the city’s downtown, residents have been seen parking their cars to stop and look up at the sky, an AFP journalist said.

Houthis claimed that they had targeted Saudi Aramco facilities in Dhahran, King Khalid International Airport and an Aramco refinery in Riyadh. Oil prices rose, with international benchmark Brent crude futures for December delivery climbing 0.3pc to $105.97 per barrel from $105.69 at the previous close.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) denied a request by Israel to join the fight against the Houthis in Yemen, Israeli media have reported.

A diplomatic source told Haaretz that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had, through US mediation, offered to help fight the Iran-linked group in part as a means of strengthening ties with the kingdom.

Mohammed bin Salman, however, opposed the move, fearing a backlash among the Saudi public.

The Saudi-led coalition has supported Yemen’s government militarily against the Houthis since 2015 in a long-running civil war that has created a humanitarian crisis.

Many civilians in the Houthi-controlled Yemeni capital, fearing shortages, yesterday rushed to queue in front of fuel stations, an AFP journalist said.

The escalation in violence follows a strike on Riyadh’s international airport on Saturday that left 13 people dead and operations suspended in the worst attack on the kingdom since 2015.

Subsidy, spending cuts should power pay scale bump

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including Tk 39,340 crore for the salaries, Tk 29,263 crore for allowances, Tk 19,733 crore for 9,15,999 pensioners and Tk 17,971 crore for employees whose salaries and allowances are paid through budget allocations.

Under the previous pay scale, the government spent Tk 1,31,000 crore a year for its employees and pensioners.

A finance ministry official told The Daily Star that the government had already taken steps to implement the commission’s revenue recommendations, some of which had been reflected in the current budget.

Measures to reduce expenditure had also started, though not all the recommendations might be implemented, the official said.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been pressing for these reforms for years, but the government has yet to implement them effectively, he said. The lenders also press for subsidy cuts during loan negotiations.

The report said subsidies for energy, exports, remittances, and agriculture were intended to benefit targeted groups but needed regular reviews to assess their effectiveness. Subsidies that distort economic efficiency should be withdrawn, freeing up resources for other uses.

It recommended three measures, in line with IMF and World Bank recommendations: market-based pricing for liquid fuel, gradual adjustments to electricity tariffs and social safety net programmes for the poor.

Together, these would ease subsidy pressure and help mobilise resources.

With the exchange rate relatively stable, export cash incentives were no longer indispensable, the report said. Such incentives could be phased out over 12-14 months, generating substantial savings.

Government spending on subsidies and incentives rose to more than three times its FY2019-20 level, from Tk 41,926 crore to Tk 1,41,238 crore in FY2024-25, according to finance ministry budget documents. The revised allocation for the following fiscal year was Tk 1,18,956 crore, though final expenditure was expected to be higher. The allocation for the current fiscal year is Tk 1,26,125 crore.

CUTTING EXPENDITURE

The report recommended rationalising the number of departments under ministries, building on a proposal by the Public Administration Reform Commission. Merging or reducing departments could streamline administration and lower recurrent expenditure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Phase out export cash incentives
- Merge or reduce depts under ministries
- Cut allocations for poorly performing dev projects
- Splitting NBR, widening tax net
- Reducing tax exemptions

It also proposed cutting allocations for Annual Development Programme projects that were progressing slowly or had unsatisfactory expected returns, and redirecting the funds to priority needs. Returns from projects delivering results more quickly could also help finance priority sectors, including salaries and allowances.

The report identified scope to reduce recurrent operating costs on domestic and foreign training, travel, fuel, lubricants, repairs and maintenance. Savings could help meet the cost of the new pay structure.

BOOSTING REVENUE

The commission noted that Bangladesh’s tax-to-GDP ratio was the lowest among developing countries, including those in South Asia. Revenue collection was insufficient to meet rising development needs and compensate for declining foreign aid, while growing debt-servicing costs further constrained the government’s fiscal space.

To address the shortfall, the report proposed splitting the National Board of Revenue (NBR) into separate Revenue Policy and Revenue Management divisions. It also recommended a Tax Expenditure Policy and Management Framework to review and reduce tax exemptions.

Broadening the tax base was another priority. Although the number of affluent individuals, business owners and entrepreneurs had grown over the past few decades, many remained outside the tax net, the report said. Bringing them into the system would require more revenue officials and greater use of modern information technology.

The report also recommended strengthening research in the revenue department by recruiting qualified staff, establishing a dedicated research cell and requiring it to submit periodic reports identifying potential revenue sources.

Non-tax revenue accounted for an average of just 13.2 percent of total revenue over the past five years, the report said, noting that the share was higher in several South and Southeast Asian countries. The government could increase collections by raising existing non-tax rates and identifying new sources, provided service quality was maintained.

It also recommended updating and rationalising rates for land development tax, duties on alcohol and narcotics, road taxes, stamp duties and vehicle taxes to reflect current conditions.

Locomotive bet falters

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Several officials at the department said the locomotives have been lying idle because BR has been unable to repair them due to the unavailability of spare parts and the absence of Hyundai Rotem’s technical support that ended in 2024. BR has largely depended on its own workshops and technical staff to maintain the locomotives over the past two years.

When BR procured the locomotives, it did not have a long-term maintenance plan, including arrangements for specialised technical support and spare parts, they said.

This correspondent emailed Hyundai Rotem on October 5, seeking information on the 18 locomotives. The company didn’t respond by the time of filing this report.

SERVICE DISRUPTION

Divided into two zones, BR primarily operates metre-gauge trains in the Eastern Zone and broad-gauge trains in the Western Zone. The Eastern Zone covers routes linking Chattogram division with Dhaka, Mymensingh and Sylhet divisions.

The breakdown of the 18 locomotives has impacted both container and passenger train services of BR’s Eastern Zone, said several BR officials.

“The Eastern Zone requires 119 locomotives a day but only 65 are available right now,” Shafiqur Rahman, chief operating superintendent (East) of BR, told this correspondent recently.

“With the 18 locomotives out of service, we can no longer operate container trains with the same frequency as before. We are prioritising passenger services with the available locomotives. This has severely affected our most profitable segment. Of the eight container trains, only two now operate on a regular basis,” he said.

According to BR’s transport department data, container train trips fell from 2,878 in fiscal 2022-23 to 1,467 in fiscal 2025-26 in the Eastern Zone, with earnings from container services dropping from Tk 296.47 crore to Tk 163.31 crore.

The data show that the average daily allocation of locomotives for container trains fell from 11 in fiscal 2022-23 to eight in fiscal 2023-24, six in fiscal 2024-25 and just three in the previous fiscal year.

The locomotive shortage has also strained passenger services, leading to the suspension of five passenger trains on Chattogram-Tangail, Dhaka-Noakhali and Laksam-Noakhali routes between March 2025 and June 2026, said BR officials.

These trains used to carry around 2,200 passengers a day, according to data from the stations at Chattogram and Laksam junctions.

Moreover, The Sonar Bangla Express, a flagship service of BR on the Dhaka-Chattogram route, has faced delays on most trips since July 2025.

The delays ranged from 15 minutes to two and a half hours, mainly because locomotives were not available on time.

PROBLEM WITH NEW LOCOMOTIVES

Asked why BR has not been able to repair the 18 locomotives, Saiful Islam, director (Locomotive Maintenance) of BR, said, “A computer-based system and specific software are needed to fix these locomotives. Besides, some of the spare parts for these locomotives are manufacturer-specific. Our existing system cannot fully meet these requirements.”

Ehtesam Md Shafiq, mechanical engineer and works manager at Pahartali Railway Diesel Workshop, said the sensors of these locomotives do not accept alternative parts, making it difficult for BR to maintain them without support from the manufacturer or authorised sources.

He further said five locomotives had developed technical faults before Hyundai Rotem’s warranty period ended in October 2024.

The company’s technical team repaired them. Though the five locomotives remained in operation, they continued to experience problems. Later, the railway staff were unable to keep them running after the team left Bangladesh.

Shafiq said they informed Hyundai Rotem about the situation, but the company told them that the locomotives needed scheduled servicing that was not covered by the warranty agreement and would have to be arranged by the railway separately.

Noting the absence of due diligence in the procurement process, transport expert Md Shamsul Hoque said BR should have assessed the long-term costs of maintenance, spare parts and technical support before purchasing the locomotives.

“The procurement authorities and the railway officials involved in planning and approving the purchase should be held accountable for failing to assess the locomotives’ long-term maintenance needs,” said Shamsul, a professor of civil engineering at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology.

The 30 locomotives were bought from Hyundai Rotem under two contracts -- 10 for Tk 297.63 crore in 2018 under an Asian Development Bank-funded project and 20 for Tk 674.09 crore under a 2019 contract.

Controversy hit the procurement of the 10 locomotives as a railway probe found differences between the contract specifications and some major components, including compressors and traction motors, supplied by Hyundai Rotem.

The issue later drew the attention of the Anti-Corruption Commission, which filed a case in 2025 against three former senior BR officials over alleged irregularities in the procurement and acceptance of the locomotives.

Six of the 10 locomotives are now lying at the Pahartali Diesel Workshop in Chattogram along with other out-of-service locomotives.

With scores of locomotives out of service, BR has drawn up a proposal to sign a Tk 680-crore maintenance agreement with Progress Rail, a US-based locomotive manufacturer and service provider, for three years.

“The BR’s procurement department did not prepare an asset management plan when it purchased the locomotives. Now BR seeks to sign a maintenance agreement to ensure maintenance, technical support and availability of spare parts for the locomotives,” said Anwarul Islam, additional chief controller of stores of BR.

Under the proposed agreement, Progress Rail, a US company based in Alabama, will provide the necessary equipment and services through its agent in Bangladesh -- Desh International. The US company holds the patents to some components used in Hyundai Rotem locomotives.

The agreement will cover 70 locomotives -- the 30 Korean-made ones in the Eastern Zone and another 40 being used in BR’s Western Zone.

Under the proposed agreement, around Tk 30 crore has been earmarked for salaries of staff, consultants and related costs, while most of the remaining Tk 650 crore will be spent on spare parts over three years.

BR officials expect that the arrangement will raise locomotive availability to around 95 percent.

Anwarul said the proposed agreement has already been approved by the railways ministry, but it requires further approval from the Finance Division and other government agencies.

“Several agencies have made some observations, which are now being addressed. The proposal will soon be submitted to the relevant agencies for approval,” he added.

Tarique seized networking, showcased Bangladesh

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looking for investment. That was a strong message from him.” Irene mentioned some of the PM’s plans for investment -- in social development and in upskilling women and the youth.

“People forget that the UN is not only a centre of multilateralism; it is also a marketplace for building relationships with like-minded states or any other kind of states. There are also heads of organisations like the head of the Gates Foundation or the head of the World Bank. And I think he really exploited the opportunities that the UN offered.

“And what struck me as I watched him through all these meetings was that he came across as a sincere person. He was authentic. He did not pretend to be what he was not. He did not pretend to talk about lofty things. He was grounded.”

Asked about Tarique’s speech at the general assembly which focused much on Bangladesh’s local issues despite the UN being a global forum, Irene said there were a whole range of speeches. She said some spoke of their lofty ideas about multilateralism and some spoke about just their own country.

She further said the PM did talk about Bangladesh’s approach to the UN and multilateralism, but most of his speech was about his vision for Bangladesh and what he is doing. “But don’t underestimate the interest that the international community has on what is happening in Bangladesh. The country has gone through a great turbulence and disruption in recent years.”

Irene pointed out that Bangladesh was trying to find a pathway towards stability following the democratic election. “So there was a great deal of curiosity among the international audience about what is happening in Bangladesh.”

She said the PM talked about climate justice, climate impact, and about training 24,000 midwives to improve maternal health and infant survival. “These were very concrete things that he was putting on the table, saying ‘this is what matters in my country and this is what I plan to do’.

“And I don’t think one should dismiss it. I think he was actually making himself accountable to the international community. He was basically saying, these are things that my people need and this is what I’m giving them.”

The envoy said it was not just the PM who was working hard through the week. “He had come with a number of his ministers. And they were working hard too.” For instance, the law minister met the heads of international human rights organisations. “And they gave him a hard time, obviously.”

They discussed what the government was doing with new legislation on the National Human Rights Commission, enforced disappearances and so on. “There were deep questions. And I don’t recall this kind of engagement. The law minister was not just meeting with a delegation but with human rights activists and defenders.

“So not just the prime minister, but his entourage also realised that they were under scrutiny of the international community and it was up to them to engage with them, tell them what they were doing. And that deserves credit.”

MULTILATERALISM IN CRISIS

As regards this edition of the UNGA, she said, “Multilateralism is going through a great crisis, where powerful states are openly defying international law, are challenging international consensus, challenging the UN. There is, in fact, a crisis of public trust in the UN as to whether it is effective not to mention a huge financial crisis.”

But going back to the 1980s and 90s, Irene noted, Bangladesh had set up a pathway for itself where it was a friend to all but beholden to none.

“And there was a strong message along those lines, that we don’t belong to this group or that group. That we are not within the orbit of any superpower, but we are friendly with all and we are here to promote our national interests. That message I think got across quite well and it was welcomed.”

What stood out during the assembly, Irene said, was that by and large, the vast majority -- especially the middle and smaller countries -- stood up against the attacks on the international rules-based system.

“There are these big powers around the world breaking the rules but in the United Nations, we heard speech after speech, where leaders were saying they believe in the international system and they would hold things together.”

“And of course, we had a president of the general assembly who was also from Bangladesh and that was quite an historic occasion. [It was great to see the prime minister giving a speech with the president of the general assembly, who is our foreign minister sitting at the back.”