

NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

Bangladesh sees no risk in joining Mecca Pact: State Foreign Minister

DHAKA, AUG 31: Bangladesh has said it saw no risk in joining the Mecca defence pact with Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Pakistan, asserting it would not restrict Dhaka's engagement with other partners.

Signed on August 7, the 'Makkah Joint Defence Agreement' establishes a framework for collective deterrence and stipulates that an armed attack on any one of the three countries would be considered an attack on all three.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Humaiun Kobir's statement during a media briefing on Sunday came days after Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman told Parliament that Bangladesh would positively consider joining the Mecca defence, if invited, and said it was an internal matter of "our Muslim family" with no scope for others to be concerned about it.

"This is a unique pact that presents new opportunities," he told reporters at the Foreign Ministry after Saudi Ambassador to Bangladesh Abdullah Zafer bin Abiyah called on him.

Kobir added Bangladesh was currently holding discussions on this matter and "those discussions are progressing positively with all bilateral partners."

"A country like Bangladesh must approach foreign policy and security cooperation in a highly integrated and flexible manner, aligned with the dynamics of the current international political system," he said. Read Political News

Kobir said, in line with this approach, "we will balance our international relations."

"Entering into one specific sphere within today's volatile or crisis-driven international political climate does not



mean you cannot contribute to other alliances or fields. It does not restrict your scope," the minister said.

He said he held a series of bilateral meetings including with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud during his Jeddah visit last week and the pact was an issue of his discussions while his interlocutors' response was "positive, very positive."

Earlier on Thursday, replying when an independent lawmaker sought clarification on Dhaka's stance about joining the 'Mecca Pact', Foreign Minister Rahman told Parliament, "We view this pact positively."

The defence treaty is an "internal matter of our family, the Muslim family" and "there is no scope for others to be concerned about it," Rahman said.

Replying to a separate question by a ruling Bangladesh nationalist Party (BNP) lawmaker, he said Bangladesh now stood tall with dignity because of Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's strong and successful foreign policy.

"Bangladesh will never bow its head to anyone again -- we have buried the subservient foreign policy," he said.

Minister Rahman, how-

ever, said Bangladesh is yet to receive any offer to join the pact but if they express an intention to include Bangladesh, "we will certainly consider it positively."

On August 7, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkiye signed the 'Makkah Joint Defence Agreement' amid increasing security concerns in the wake of escalating tensions in West Asia.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signed the pact after the Makkah Al-Mukarramah Summit for Joint Defence at the Al-Safa Palace in Islam's holiest city of Mecca.

The 'Makkah Joint Defence Agreement' is "intended to strengthen collective deterrence against any act of aggression, and stipulates that any armed attack against any one of the three States shall be regarded as an attack against them all," a joint statement said.

In New Delhi, replying to questions about the pact, India's External Affairs Ministry spokesman Randhir Jaiswal in his weekly briefing on Friday said, "We continue to closely follow all developments having a bearing on India's security and take all

necessary steps to safeguard it."

Foreign policy experts and former diplomats viewed Bangladesh's willingness to join the pact as a deviation from its long committed doctrine of strict non-alignment and said such a development could complicate its foreign relations, particularly with neighbouring India.

Former ambassador and commentator Mahfuzur Rahman said the existing three partners of the agreement are in military conflicts or are likely to be involved in armed confrontations with other countries while Bangladesh has little possibility to face any such situation.

"A military accord like the Mecca Pact could be important for Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkiye, but not essential in any way for Bangladesh," he told PTI.

The former diplomat said Bangladesh might get involved in any war situation for "no justified reason" if it joined the pact that "has an article on collective security."

Another former diplomat Humayun Kabir, who runs a think-tank Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, said Bangladesh traditionally maintained a policy of not joining military pacts.

"If this is a military pact, then we have to examine how the security interests of all its members align with Bangladesh's national security interests," he said and added the country will need to understand how the inclusion of certain countries would affect its security, economic interests and broader strategic interests.

Proponents of the pact, however, argue the alliance would provide Bangladesh vital strategic depth and enhance national security.

China provides USD 2.2 million aid for Nepal flood victims

KATHMANDU, AUG 31: China provided USD 2.2 million in financial assistance to Nepal for victims of the devastating flash flood, with President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Qiang expressing condolences over the loss of lives and property, the government said on Monday.

Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Zhang Maoming handed over a cheque for NPR 350 million, equivalent to USD 2 million, to Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle on Sunday as assistance from the Chinese government, the Finance Ministry said.

The Chinese envoy also handed over USD 200,000 in assistance from the Chinese Red Cross to the Nepal government, it said.

"Nepal is not alone in this disaster; China is always with Nepal," Zhang conveyed to Wagle on behalf of Xi and Li.

The Chinese leaders expressed deep sorrow over the loss of lives in the disaster



and conveyed their condolences to the victims' families, the ministry said.

The death toll from flash floods in Nepal rose to 903 on Monday, with bodies continuing to be recovered, while nearly 4,250 people are still missing following the disaster.

The disaster, believed to have been triggered by a collapse or avalanche of ice and rock near the Nepal-Tibet border, devastated towns and villages in northern and central Nepal on August 26.

The Bhotekoshi River, which flows south from the Himalayan border region,

carried the floodwaters downstream, sweeping away homes, vehicles, roads and bridges and damaging hydropower projects. It killed 16 people on the Chinese side as well, while nearly 550 people remain missing in Tibet, according to Chinese media reports. (PTI)

In one Nepal district, flood catastrophe is measured in bodies and burial trenches

KATHMANDU, AUG 31: The devastating flash floods in the Himalayan region swept so many people downstream that authorities in one Nepalese district have begun burying bodies in temporary graves before they can be identified, prompting accusations that Hindu funeral traditions are being ignored.

In south-central Nepal's Chitwan district, the scale of the catastrophe was evident in some 250 bodies awaiting identification and the hastily dug trenches for their temporary burial following Wednesday's catastrophic floods and mudslides, which killed at least 800 people and left more than 3,000 missing in Nepal and Tibet.

The bodies were carried hundreds of kilometers downstream by the Bhotekoshi River from the flood's epicentre before being recovered in Chitwan.

Authorities carried out a temporary burial of about 100 victims on Saturday, officials said, as forensic teams struggled to cope. A convoy of vehicles carrying bodies entered a lush, forested area as an excavator dug a wide trench in the red earth while officials and media looked on. Anil Thapa, a police inspector coordinating the handling of the bodies, said another 50 bodies were having DNA samples taken ahead of their likely burial Sunday.

Authorities preserve the DNA samples, photograph distinguishing facial features and record other identifying details, Thapa said. The bodies are assigned a reference number to help families claim them later.



Thapa said many of the bodies had remained submerged in floodwaters for about four days and were already decomposing by the time they were recovered.

Across the region, homes, vehicles and farm tractors still lay partially buried in mud.

Limited forensic infrastructure and inadequate morgue capacity in the district further strained efforts to manage the overwhelming number of bodies recovered from the disaster, officials said.

High humidity and sweltering heat accelerated decomposition, compounding the challenges as health experts warned that leaving the remains exposed could increase the risk of disease.

Fresh landslides in the area on Sunday closed the main highway linking the capital city of Kathmandu and Chitwan, a day after it partially reopened, complicating efforts to move bodies and relief supplies.

As survivors grappled with the aftermath, criticism of

the burials mounted. Some residents said the dead had waited days for their last rites and were denied dignity in death. Families still waiting to locate missing relatives and some public figures questioned whether authorities moved too quickly.

The issue is particularly sensitive in Nepal, a predominantly Hindu nation where the dead are traditionally cremated.

Ruby Chaudhary, who has two missing relatives, said the burials should not proceed without families' consent. "The dead deserve to be treated with dignity," she said. "Our tradition is to cremate them on the riverbank, surrounded by their immediate family."

A former prime minister, Baburam Bhattarai, said it was inappropriate to dispose of unidentified bodies before search and rescue operations were complete and without broader consultation with families of the missing.

If morgues were insufficient, authorities could have mobilized emergency re-

sources to set up temporary morgues or secure cold storage facilities, he said in a social media post Saturday night.

Officials said the burials were a temporary measure necessitated by health concerns and limited capacity.

"People are worried that this could be a permanent burial, but it is only temporary management," Thapa said. "If someone is able to verify the identity later using the available information, they can take back the body and perform the appropriate funeral rites."

Amrit Bahadur Rai, Nepal's foreign secretary, said the temporary burial of unidentified bodies was carried out in line with internationally accepted disaster-management protocols, including those of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

"Families can match records later, and will be allowed to exhume (the remains later) for necessary rituals," Rai said at a press briefing in Kathmandu. (AP)

Brain, stomach signals may help predict response to antidepressant treatment: IIT-K study

NEW DELHI, AUG 31: An analysis of electric signals from the brain and stomach, along with clinical symptoms, may help predict outcomes within a week or 10 days of starting an antidepressant treatment, researchers from the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IIT-K) and Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi Memorial Medical College have found.

The findings, published in the journal Frontiers in Psychiatry, could enable an earlier assessment of a patient's response to the treatment, as opposed to the conventional four to six period typically required, they said.

Depression is a mental health disorder marked by persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness and a disinterest in activities. Studies have shown that up to 30 per cent of the affected population may not respond to an

adequate pharmacological therapy.

"Our study shows that objective non-invasive brain and gut electrophysiological signals collected in about the first week of treatment already contain valuable information about treatment response to precisely guide the intervention," author Pragathi Priyadharsini Balasubramani, assistant professor at IIT-K's department of cognitive science, said.

Electrical activity in the brain and stomach using electroencephalography (EEG) and electrogastrography (EGG) was examined, respectively, and analysed together with clinical symptom data.

The signals, recorded within the first 7-10 days of initiating treatment, were found to help identify patients unlikely to respond to an antidepressant.

"We found that different

symptom profiles were associated with distinct patterns of brain and gut physiology linked to treatment outcomes.

"Recognising these biological subtypes helps explain why patients respond differently to the same medication and facilitates personalised treatment strategies," first author Amal Jude Ashwin Francis, a PhD scholar at IIT-K's department of cognitive science, said.

The researchers looked at 206 participants, including 144 treatment-naïve patients with depression. EEG and EGG signals were recorded at the start of treatment and again about a week later.

The predictive model identified patients unlikely to respond to an antidepressant treatment with an 84 per cent sensitivity (correctly identifying a non-responder) and a 78 per cent specificity (correctly identifying some-

one not a non-responder) during development.

When tested on an independent patient cohort, the model achieved a 77.3 per cent overall accuracy, with an 80 per cent specificity and 71.4 per cent sensitivity in identifying non-responders, the researchers said.

"Our findings suggest that combining brain and gut electrophysiological markers with clinical phenotyping offers a promising, scalable approach to personalise depression treatment," the authors wrote.

"This approach could guide clinicians in developing more effective and tailored medication strategies, ultimately improving patient outcomes," they said.

Further studies across larger and more diverse patient groups will be needed to validate the approach, the team added. (PTI)

El Nino events more intense over past 40 years, compared to pre-industrial era: Study

NEW DELHI, AUG 31: El Nino events, the climate pattern associated with warmer ocean temperatures and more extreme events, has become about 40 per cent stronger over the past 40 years, compared to the pre-industrial era, according to a study.

Researchers, including those from the University of Michigan in the US, examined modern and ancient corals in the Galapagos Islands, located in the Pacific Ocean around 1,000 kilometres from the coast of Ecuador in South America.

The findings published in the journal Science show that El Nino events in the last four decades were stronger than

any in the 1,000 years prior to about 1850, when humans began impacting the climate with greenhouse gases.

"We don't see a time in the past where El Ninos have been as strong as today, and we show that the strength of El Nino changes in parallel with the warming of global temperature," lead author Julia Cole, professor and chair of the University of Michigan's department of earth and environmental sciences, said.

"Our findings tell us that the big El Nino events of the last 40 years are not normal in the context of the last thousand years," Cole said.

Most of the world's weather and climate is gov-

erned by the El Nino - "Southern Oscillation (ENSO) in the tropical Pacific Ocean, of which El Nino -- the warm cycle -- that raises sea surface temperatures and is said to drive extreme weather around the world.

Global weather and climate agencies have forecast the 2026-27 El Nino with a greater than 90 per cent chance to reach 'very strong' or near-record levels.

"The question is not whether the current El Nino is going to happen, but how bad is it going to be, and how bad will the impacts be?" Cole said.

"This event is superimposed on global warming,

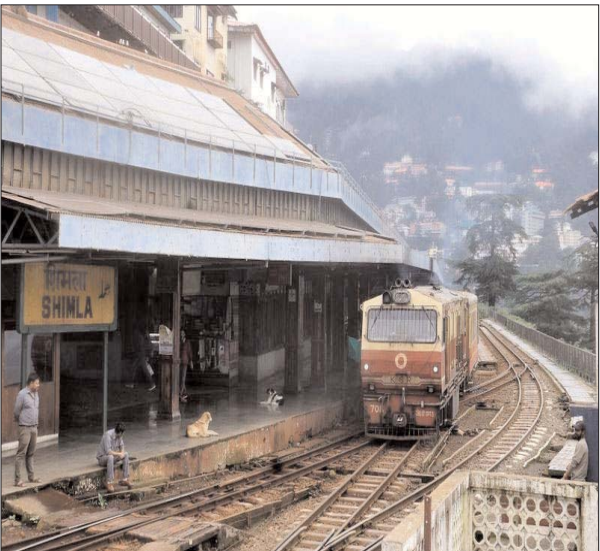
and it's likely to supercharge the temperature increase that we would normally see from greenhouse gases. There are forecasts that we might get as hot as 1.7 or 1.8 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial temperatures, which is quite a bit higher than the current record," the lead author added.

The researchers sampled cores from 13 corals, including living colonies and boulders of ancient coral, from the Galapagos Islands. Corals grow one to two centimetres per year, secreting layers of calcium carbonate - its chemistry provides a record of seawater temperatures in which the corals grew.

NEW DELHI, AUG 31: At least 391 passengers and 40 train crew were evacuated to Kalka after a hill slip scuppered operations at the Kalka-Shimla route, leaving part of a connecting bridge exposed, Northern Railway said on Sunday.

The slippage, caused by incessant rain, undermined a section of the track between Koti and Ghuman stations Saturday night.

"Following a hill slip yesterday at Bridge No. 57 between the Koti and Ghuman stations on the Shimla-Kalka UNESCO World Heritage section, Northern Railway officials executed a prompt and seamless rescue operation,



ensuring zero inconvenience to travelers," a Railways press note said.

Four incoming trains were short-terminated in the wake of the accident.

More than 400 passengers and train crew were picked up in five buses, and two Tempo Travellers from Solan, Koti, and Dharampur, Railways said.

The press note said that while local passengers were disbursed to their destinations, around 120 passengers were accommodated on Train No 13052, which was specially rescheduled to 1.30 am.

"Due to the quick action, efficient transshipment, and empathetic care provided by Northern Railway staff, the entire operation was conducted smoothly without a single passenger complaint or refund request registered at Kalka station," the public transporter said.