

Bangladesh government faces political furore over Indian dam project

The Bangladesh government is coming under increasing pressures from its own ministers and ruling Awami League lawmakers to hold urgent bilateral talks with India, which is planning to build a dam on the Barak river the two neighbours share, a media report here said Saturday.

Pressures are mounting as the government prepares to send a delegation of parliamentarians and experts to visit the project site. No date for the visit has been announced.

Many Awami League lawmakers and cabinet ministers believe that the proposed dam at Tipaimukh across the Barak river might cause ecological disaster in downstream Bangladesh, the New Age newspaper reported.

They want bilateral talks with India even as the opposition parties have joined protesting environmentalists, NGOs and other opinion makers, some of whom have taken to the streets.

A number of lawmakers and ministers of the Awami League-led coalition government said Friday that the government would uphold the country's interest in any bilateral dialogue on the dam and equitable sharing of the common rivers' waters.

Finance minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith opined that the project, if implemented, would be harmful for the lower riparian country.

'The proposed dam is not good for our nation as it is against the environment and nature,' said the minister.

The issue has generated a blame-game between the ruling party and the opposition, each charging the other with 'silence' instead of lodging protests with India.

Muhith said the Awami League's protests against the project were 'ignored' by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

India had completed the design of the dam and floated an international tender when Bangladesh was ruled by the BNP and its Islamist ally the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Muhith, however, urged all concerned to wait until the Bangladesh delegation submits its report after visiting the project site.

'As India has invited us to send a delegation to visit the site, we should make our decision after it submits its report,' he added.

Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury told the New Age that the problems raised by the Tipaimukh dam should be resolved through consultation.

'It won't be good neighbourly behaviour if India constructs the dam without consulting Bangladesh,' said Textile and Jute Minister Abdul Latif Siddiqui.

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