

Russian govt resigns as Putin calls for reforms

AFP, Moscow

Russia's government resigned in a shock announcement yesterday after President Vladimir Putin proposed a shake-up of the constitution.

The announcement by Putin's longtime ally Dmitry Medvedev came after the president used his annual state of the nation address to call for a nationwide vote on a package of constitutional reforms.

The resignation raises deep questions about the long-term shape of Russia's political system and the future of Putin, who is due to step down at the end of his fourth Kremlin term in 2024.

A few hours after the Russian leader's address, Medvedev and Putin appeared alongside each other on national television to say the government was stepping down.

Medvedev said the constitutional proposals would make significant changes to the country's balance of power and so "the government in its current form has resigned".

"We should provide the president of our country with the possibility to take all the necessary measures" to carry out the changes, Medvedev said. "All further decisions will be taken by the president."

Putin thanked Medvedev -- who also



served as Russian president for four years from 2008 -- expressing "satisfaction with the results that have been achieved."

The changes Putin proposed yesterday would transfer more authority to parliament, including the power to choose the prime minister and senior cabinet members, instead of the president as under the current system.

Other changes would see the role of regional governors enhanced and residency requirements tightened for presidential candidates.

"Today in our society there is a clear demand for change," Putin said in his address. "People want development, they are striving to move forward in their careers, in their education, in becoming prosperous."

The package of reforms would be put to a national vote, he said, without specifying when.

"We will be able to build a strong prosperous Russia only on the basis of respect for public opinion," the 67-year-old leader said.

Speculation has swirled about changes to Russia's political system that would allow Putin to stay on after 2024.

Some have suggested he could remain as a prime minister with increased powers or in a powerful behind-the-scenes role.

4 crore could be displaced

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caused adverse impacts on fishermen's livelihood," Hasina said.

The PM added that the balance of the environment was also damaged due to climate change.

It has put negative impacts on biodiversity as well as on agriculture, said Hasina.

She opined that climate change caused outbreak of different insect-borne diseases.

Hasina also outlined her government's various measures, including the formulation of Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, to increase the national capacity to combat climate change impacts.

The PM added that her government has taken up a programme to plant 1 crore trees this year across the country to mark Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth centenary. This would play a significant role in curbing global greenhouse gas emission, she said.

Responding to another question

In debt father

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sedatives and contraceptives she was given the night before.

The girl then told the woman that her father gave her the pills because his employer would come to visit around 3:00am on Tuesday to spend "some time with her".

The woman then called some locals and the girl told them that she was often given the pills and forced to sleep with her father's employer.

One of the neighbours filmed her statement.

"The victim told us that her father forced her to do this. Her father used to help the rapist in the brutality," a neighbour told The Daily Star, quoting the girl.

Police said the girl, her father, and her elder brother lived in a rented room -- one in a row of such rooms in a tin-shack.

"She must have been given the sedatives so that she cannot scream," a neighbour told The Daily Star.

Locals said a police team led by a sub-inspector went to the area Tuesday morning.

A resident said, "The officer tried to bury the incident at first. He said we were spreading rumours. But we protested."

Over 20 locals, mostly women, talked to this correspondent and gave identical accounts.

"We told the police that we recorded the victim's statement and threatened them with larger protests. The SI then left the scene, saying he was ill," a woman said.

Another team of police then arrested the father.

Asked, Mostafa Anwar, inspector of Kamrangirchar Police Station, refuted the allegation that they tried to bury the incident. He said the SI in question was really sick and would not be able to speak.

Locals said the girl often requested them to arrange a marriage for her. "My father will never get me married," she used to tell us," said a woman.

Police arrested the father Tuesday night after the girl informed them, but the alleged rapist Abul Hossain, 35, managed to flee.

A case was filed with Kamrangirchar Police Station against Abul and the father, said Sub-inspector Sheikh Mohammad Morshed Ali of the police station.

The father borrowed Tk 6,000 from Abul over a year ago and was not able to pay the debt, he added.

Abul then told the father that he would not need to repay if he let him have sex with the girl, the SI said.

The father agreed and the first rape occurred in the girl's house a year ago, the officer said.

The girl's mother is a migrant worker and her brother a labourer.

Abul would visit her at home occasionally and rape her, Morshed added, quoting the girl.

"A neighbour called 999, the

national emergency helpline," he said, adding that police rescued the girl and arrested her father hours later.

The girl was sent to one-stop crisis centre of Dhaka Medical College Hospital later that night.

OCC coordinator Bilkis Begum said doctors found evidence of rape after examining the girl.

GARMENT WORKER GANGRAPED
A garment worker was allegedly gang raped by her landlord and three others in Savar's Ashulia area after the woman and her husband failed to pay rent.

Police arrested the 45-year-old landlord after the 22-year-old woman filed a case with Ashulia Police Station yesterday.

According to the case statement, the woman and her family had been living in the house for a year. She had not paid rent for December.

Around 11:30pm Tuesday, the four suspects went to the woman's house and asked for the money. When the woman and her husband sought time, the suspects beat them up.

At one point, they confined the husband to a room and raped her in another, the case statement reads.

The suspects also took away a gold chain and some belongings of the family, Selim Reza, sub-inspector Ashulia Police Station, told our Savar correspondent.

Police are trying to arrest the other accused.

TWO GANG-RAPED IN MOULVIBAZAR

Two women aged 18 and 20 were gang-raped in Moulvibazar town Tuesday evening.

The women were going home when they were stopped by four men who allegedly raped them.

Police arrested one of the suspects, Munna Mia, 30, a resident of Uttar Jagannathpur area of the town, reports our correspondent.

The suspects took the women to a bush near the road, tied their hands and gagged them with tape, and then raped them, said Alamgir Hossain, officer-in-charge of Moulvibazar Police Station.

The women are being treated at a hospital.

GIRL RAPED IN DINAJPUR

Police arrested a man on charge of raping a six-year-old girl in Chirirbandar upazila of Dinajpur Tuesday night after her father filed a case.

Mursalin, 21, was sent to jail yesterday.

The girl was admitted to a hospital in Dinajpur.

According to the First Information Report, the girl was playing near her home Tuesday afternoon when the suspect took her girl to an under-construction luring her with chocolates.

Subrata Sarkar, officer-in-charge of Dinajpur Police Station, said the man raped the girl there. As the girl cried for help, villagers rushed there and rescued her.

The accused fled the scene, but was arrested later, the OC said.



Villagers fishing with traditional tools in a swamp during Palo Utshab, an annual celebration customary to Doulatpur area of Sylhet's Bishwanath upazila. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

EC in a tight spot

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with the HC, seeking a directive to defer the January 30 polls by a week. The court on Tuesday rejected the petition.

"We did not expect this kind of verdict. It came as a shock to us," Rana said.

POLLS DATE COINCIDES WITH PUJA

Members of the Hindu community said the observance of Saraswati Puja will start at 9:10am on January 29 and continue till 11:00am on January 30 as per Loknath Panjika, a traditional annual Bangla calendar that the Hindus follow.

Saraswati Puja is observed at almost all educational institutions where worshippers gather to offer prayers. But things may be different this time in the capital as polling centres will be set up at different schools, colleges and universities.

It will be difficult for worshippers to go to the educational institutions to observe the Puja as section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code will be imposed in and around the polling centres, said Rana.

Several top officials at the EC Secretariat told this newspaper that they could set aside one or two rooms in each of the educational institutions on the polling day for the Hindus to observe puja.

They also mentioned that the EC

may defer the polls date if it faces mounting pressure from all sides.

Members of the Hindu community were stunned by the EC announcement on December 22 that the election would be held on January 30.

They said many members of the community boycotted last year's Rangpur-3 by-polls as it was held on October 5, the second day of Durga Puja.

"Earlier, we had urged the EC to reschedule the Rangpur-3 by-polls but the commission did not pay heed to our demands," Rana said.

"We suspect that a vested quarter is trying to curb the constitutional rights of the minorities. It seems that the EC is unable to understand the issue of religious sensitivity."

Rafiqul, however, said they fixed the election date keeping in mind that the Saraswati Puja, according to the government calendar, falls on January 29.

"We also took the SSC exams schedule into consideration."

The election commissioner said if they shift the election to January 28 or before that, it would be a "breach of rules".

"We have already set the polls campaign period from January 10 to midnight of January 28. If the EC shifts the election date to January 28, the candidates' campaign period will be cut short as they will have to end

campaigns 32 hours before that.

"If we bring the election date forward, they [candidates] will go to court."

"We are having discussions on how to leave some educational institutions out of the polls process so that members of the Hindu community can observe puja there," he added.

Meanwhile, demands for deferral of the city polls are getting louder.

DU students blocked the busy Shahbagh intersection for nearly one hour for the second consecutive day yesterday demanding deferral of the election.

On Monday, leaders of Bangladesh Hindu-Buddha-Christian Oikya Parishad and Bangladesh Puja Uddjapan Parishad put forward the same demand at a meeting with Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda.

A day before, a group of DU students from Jagannath Hall held a meeting with Election Commissioner Mahub Talukdar in this regard.

Jagannath Hall Provost Mihir Lal Saha on January 10 sent a letter to DSCC Returning Officer Abdul Baten, calling for deferral of the polls. The RO forwarded it to the EC.

In separate statements the following day, Dhaka University Central Students' Union, and Jagannath and Bijoy Ekattar Hall students' unions demanded that the EC change the voting date.

Illegal trade in containers



PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Containers being sold illegally in Chattogram's Nayabazar area recently.

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they are shipped off within six months.

If the containers are not sent back, the shipping agents are liable to pay Tk 60,000 import duty for each 20-foot container and Tk 1.40 lakh for 40-foot containers, states Customs Permanent Order-01 dated 14/02/1999.

NO MONITORING, EXCUSES

When an empty container arrives in the country, the shipping agent concerned submits a detailed list (called BL) to general bond section of the customs. An entry is also made into the server of customs.

Empty containers do not require bill of entry, but customs officials can find out where a container is by searching their server and the BL.

However, Fakhrul Alam, commissioner of Chattogram Customs House, said they do not know the number of empty containers brought in or sent back with export goods, as import documents such as bill of entry or letter of credit are not required for empty containers.

He said while shipping agents must pay duty if any container is destroyed or sold, no money has ever been paid to customs for this.

Yet, at various container selling shops and workshops in Chattogram, this correspondent found at least 57 empty containers with tracking numbers.

The tracking numbers of seven containers was cross-checked by this correspondent with data on Chattogram port's server Container Terminal Management Service (CTMS).

CTMS showed that the containers entered Bangladesh between August 21, 2018, and June 24, 2019, and were shown to be at the port's yard.

One of the containers (with tracking number FCUI3138251) was found at the Ajmir Marine Enterprise's workshop in the port city's Nayabazar area. According to the CTMS and customs server, it was brought in by HR Shipping

Lines Ltd on June 1 last year and is still in the port.

Omar Faruk, secretary of Chattogram port, told The Daily Star that the port's server was not updated regularly.

He said they would enquire how the server was still showing wrong information on containers that were taken out of the port so long ago. "We will verify the information," he added.

About container FCUI3138251, Rakibul Islam, managing director of HR Shipping Lines, told The Daily Star, "This container might have been taken outside the port or the (inland container) depot but we do not know how."

He said sometimes a container can be destroyed, or sold at auction, when it arrives at its last destination after its expiry. However, that too must be done upon customs authority's permission and paying duty.

"Till date, we have not sold or destroyed any container," he claimed.

Last year, an investigation into at least 6,000 import consignments, some of which went missing and remained undelivered, revealed that shipping agents and owners of inland container depots were not following the customs' rules regarding containers.

The probe is still on and officials could not say how many containers were actually missing.

Joint Commissioner of Customs Shariful Hasan, who led the investigation, told The Daily Star that the general bond section of Customs House is not monitoring the containers and government is losing revenue due to lack of supervision.

Nitish Kumar Biswas, assistant commissioner of general bond section, and Swapan Kumar Bepari, revenue officer of the Customs House, told The Daily Star that they do not know anything about the 1999 order of the Customs House.

Swapan said most of the shipping

agents and private depot owners submit a list of containers transported from the port to the depots. But no verification is done to ensure if containers leaving the port actually ends up at the inland container depots.

The president of Bangladesh Inland Container Depots Association Nurul Qayyum Khan said depot owners were liable to pay compensation for any missing containers.

He said, "Till date, no shipping agents have ever complained about any missing containers."

"We all know that empty containers are taken outside the depot illegally and sold in the market but I do not know how this happens."

He suspects that some of the 18 private depot owners as well as shipping agents could be involved.

Ahsanul Haque Chowdhury, president of the Bangladesh Shipping Agent Association, maintains that empty containers are not being imported for sale.

"Some quarters may be selling those illegally," he said.

Regarding the customs policy about selling containers, he opined that many people might not know about the order because it was old and that customs should reissue a circular to create awareness.

BOOMING BUSINESS

Jasim Uddin, proprietor of Ajmir Marine Enterprise, however, told The Daily Star that he buys all his containers from shipping agents.

"I do not know the law about empty containers. We buy empty containers from different shipping agents, who sell the containers unsuitable for carrying cargo with permission from the principal company (the main owner of the containers)," he said.

Usman Goni, who owns three container workshops in the capital's Farmgate, Kamalapur and Chattogram's Sadarghat area, asserted that the empty container trade could not be illegal since the money is transacted through banking channels.

He claimed that the shipping agents and the principal owners of the containers make contracts to bring these boxes to Bangladesh for resale.

Seeking anonymity, a managing director of a shipping agent company, admitted to selling containers to meet unaccounted shipping expenses.

The MD said many shipping agents and owners of private inland container depots were compelled to sell containers in the market, knowing that such sales were illegal, as shipping agents often have to bribe to get clearance for ships.

Besides, they also have to bear the cost of storing the containers at the port yard or inland container depots when importers do not take delivery of their consignments, the MD said.

Info minister meets Modi

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

Bangladesh Information Minister Hasan Mahmud was among the ministerial-level delegates from 12 countries who called on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his residence yesterday on the sidelines of the Raisina Dialogue.

Mahmud was invited with the others to meet Modi as a special gesture by India even though he was neither a speaker nor an attendee at the two-day Dialogue, a key event of the Indian External Affairs Ministry, which ended yesterday.

Mahmud, who was in Delhi for a meeting with Indian Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javdekar, deferred his travel to Hyderabad to meet the Indian PM, diplomatic sources said.

Neither Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen nor his deputy Shahriar Alam participated in the Raisina Dialogue though both were invited.

Mahmud later flew to Hyderabad where he would visit the Ramoji Film City to get some idea of it as Bangladesh is building Bangabandhu Film City in Gazipur and India has promised assistance on this score.

Among others who met Modi with Mahmud were Foreign Ministers of Iran, the Maldives, Latvia, Uzbekistan, Hungary, Czech Republic, Estonia, South Africa, Denmark, the Secretary General of the Commonwealth and the Secretary General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Russell powers

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But Russell turned the game on its head with a scintillating show of power-hitting, scoring an unbeaten 22-ball 54 to see his side home with two wickets in hand and four balls to spare.

Rajshahi's chase of 165 had got off to a poor start, with in-form opener Liton Das (6) and Afif Hossain (2) departing early. Left-hander Irfan Shukkur was the only highlight of their inning at the top, scoring 45 off 42 balls as Chattogram bowled tight overs.

But as the chase looked out of sight, Russell arrived and hit the Chattogram bowlers all around the ground to clinch victory for his side. Russell's Rajshahi will now take on Mushfiqur Rahim's Khulna Tigers in the BBPL final tomorrow.

Earlier, despite a flying start provided by Gayle, Chattogram, who were sent in to bat first, lost their way in the middle and eventually posted 164 for 9 in 20 overs.

Chattogram lost opener Ziaur Rahman (6) and in-form Imrul Kayes (5) cheaply, but Gayle was in a punishing mood. The Jamaican hit the ball all over the park. After remaining quiet in his first three BBPL games, the 'Universe Boss' got his groove back and struck a blistering 20 ball 50 -- his first in the ongoing tournament.

The team was cruising towards a big total and at one stage were 97 for 2 in 10 overs before Gayle was bowled by Afif Hossain for a 24 ball 60 which featured five sixes and six fours.

Skipper Mahmudullah Riyad tried to maintain the tempo by striking three sixes and an equal number of fours, but he, too, departed after a quick-fire 33 off 18 balls. Chattogram, who were eyeing to post a total of somewhere near the 200-run mark, kept losing wickets after that and added just 36 runs in the last five overs.

Rajshahi's two Pakistani bowlers -- Mohammad Irfan and Mohammad Nawaz -- picked up two wickets each.

BNP's DSCC

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down Ishraque's petition seeking exemption from the charges.

The court fixed February 9 for starting the trial of the case.

The accused faces up to three years in prison if convicted of the charges.

The BNP mayor nominee is now campaigning in the capital. Elections to the Dhaka south and north city corporations are scheduled to be held on January 30.

According to the prosecution, the ACC on September 1 in 2008 had served a notice on Ishraque asking him to submit his wealth statement within seven days from the date of receiving the notice. The notice was served during the tenure of the then caretaker government.

But Ishraque didn't file the wealth statement. The graft watchdog on August 29 in 2010 lodged a case against him with Ramna Police Station.

On December 6 in 2018, ACC Deputy Director Jahangir Hossain pressed charges against the accused.

On May 5 last year, Judge KM Emrul Kayesh of the Senior Special Judge's Court of Dhaka took cognisance of the charges in absence of Ishraque and issued an arrest warrant against him.

The accused secured bail from the court on December 9 last year after surrendering before it.