

Thousands take to street in Albanian judge row

AFP, Tirana

Thousands protested on Monday in Albania's capital city Tirana against a left-wing government that they accuse of trying to take control of the judiciary.

President Ilir Meta, who organised the rally with the backing of the centre-right opposition, accused Prime Minister Edi Rama of trying to control the nomination of judges to the Constitutional Court.

Rama's government launched a vetting procedure in 2016 aimed at rooting out corrupt judges and boosting the rule of law -- as part of Albania's attempt to woo the European Union.

But Meta told the crowd Rama was "kidnapping" the court, adding: "This is not the rule of law but the power of those who want to control everything in a mafia-style manner."

"Rama, leave!" chanted the protesters who gathered at Tirana's main boulevard and waved the country's red flags featuring a black double-headed eagle.

20 shots

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to take shelter in safe places. Following the incident, refugees have restricted their movement."

Lt Mirza Shahed Mahatab, company commander of the Rab's Teknaf camp, said they sent a Rab team to the spot on information that criminals opened fire. However, criminals managed to flee before the arrival of law enforcers.

The Rab official said they continued drives to arrest the criminals. Pradip Kumar Das, OC of Teknaf Police Station, said a police team visited the spot.

Necessary measures were taken to keep law and order under control, he added.

Lawmaker's

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but the power plant had partially encroached on the river, which violates the Water Body Conservation Act 2000 and Bangladesh Environment Protection Act 1995, said Arif.

The BIWTA joint director said they would also excavate the encroached portions of the river to return it to its former state.

Lawmaker Aslam visited the site during the drive and protested the action.

He told reporters that he did not encroach on the river and that the power plant was built on his own land.

Aslam threatened legal action against the drive and left the site.

Arif said they started their drive against illegal structures last year and yesterday was Day-68 of the drive.

"We have knocked down 7,000 illegal structures and recovered around 150 acres of land from encroachers during the drive," he said.

The drive will resume this morning to demolish other illegal structure in the area, said Arif.

"We are continuing the drive to knock down illegal structures from rivers and will persist until all illegal establishments are removed," said Arif.

Judge

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After the order was passed, supporters of Awal started demonstrations on the court premises.

Later, Awal and his wife got bail from another court in the district.

Joint District and Sessions Judge Nahid Nasrin, who has been given the responsibility of acting district and sessions judge of Pirojpur, granted them bail after they moved a review petition, said Awal's lawyer Shahidul Haque Khan Panna.

In the petition, the couple said they were sick.

The lawyer, also general secretary of Pirojpur Bar Association, said Judge Mannan was no more a judge of Pirojpur as he had been transferred.

ACC Deputy Director Ali Akbar filed the cases with the commission's integrated district office in Barishal on December 30 last year.

On January 7, Awal and his wife were granted ad-interim bail from the High Court.

Later, the SC upheld the HC order after the anti-graft watchdog appealed for cancelling their bail.

Awal was MP from Pirojpur-1 for two consecutive terms in 2008 and 2014.

According to one case statement, the former lawmaker took lease of khas land using fake documents and built a three-storey building on it.

The building was rented out to Nazipur office of Pirojpur Palli Bidyut Samity for Tk 17,250 a month from October 1, 2017.

Meanwhile, rights body Ain o Salish Kendra yesterday expressed concern over demonstrations and setting up of roadblocks after the authorities had been ordered to send the couple to jail.

In a press release, it said it believes that a public representative and their followers must support the country's judicial system. It said such demonstration might send the message that a former or incumbent lawmaker is above the law.



Demonstrators hold placards during a protest over India's new citizenship law, in New Delhi yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Bangladeshi researchers

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Marjan Maria -- from Jagannath University, guided and led closely by Sabir Bin Muzaffar, professor of biology at University of United Arab Emirates.

The same group of researchers also recorded another species in the forests of Bangladesh last year. While that was not new to science, it extended the range of Raorchestes longchuanensis all the way from China to Bangladesh. That was the 50th recorded species in the country.

It was the recording of Raorchestes longchuanensis that launched a quest by the researchers to determine if there were more such species that have gone undiscovered due to their size and disguised call.

Thus, started the research journey. Last year surveys were conducted in

five different forests of the country, from rainforests to semi-deciduous, in search of possible new recordings.

They looked for frogs of the Raorchestes species group in Lawachara, Satchari, Rema-Kalenga, Adampur and Lathiula forests.

Due to its size, insect-like call and superb camouflaging skills, it can go unnoticed but the group persevered. Between April and May last year, they collected samples of the small frog from Adampur Reserve Forest and Lawachara National Park.

After running genetic tests and going through a few hundred scientific papers, the researchers realised what they are looking at is a completely new addition to the world of frogs.

The team have completed writing a detailed scientific article on the

discovery and made the news public just last week. It has been accepted by ZooKeys which is a peer-reviewed open access scientific journal covering zoological taxonomy, phylogeny, and biogeography.

The article is currently under press. At a time, when the everyone is being battered by cataclysmic events from the world of wildlife, this discovery is yet another reminder that there is hope. The researchers now plan to further study the frog species in a bid to determine its natural history and its ecological importance.

The discovery of new species, even as we enter a great storm of extinction, is a reminder too that we need to preserve habitats, protect our forests and continue to celebrate wildlife. Because it is full of yet undiscovered mysteries!

Soviet-Bangladesh friendship

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assistance on specific projects in Bangladesh like the Ghorashal Thermal Power Station, general electrical manufacturing plant in Chittagong, high-powered radio transmitter and oil and gas exploration.

At a reception given in his honour by the mayor of Leningrad, Bangabandhu reiterates that friendship between the Soviet Union and Bangladesh is based on a set of principles.

Andrei Gromyko, USSR foreign minister, assures his Bangladeshi counterpart at a bilateral meeting that the Soviet Union will use its good offices for repatriation of Bangalees living in Pakistan.

BHASHANI'S TELEGRAM TO BANGABANDHU

Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, chief of National Awami Party, in a telegram to Prime Minister

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman warns of a 'total famine ahead' and says unless effective measures are taken in time, lakhs of people will die of starvation.

NEW CURRENCY NOTES

Bangladesh Bank issues new 100- and 1-rupee currency notes today. The present currency notes of 10, 5 and 1 will, however, remain in circulation. The Bank demonetises all 50-rupee notes, which will cease to be legal tender with effect from tomorrow.

RS. 500CR NEEDED FOR RELIEF

Bangladesh Planning Commission is preparing a comprehensive paper for the donor countries and international agencies indicating the relief requirements for the 30 million displaced people in the country. It has been estimated that about Rs. 500 crore in cash and over 30 lakh tonnes of food grain will be required for the

immediate phase of the relief. But the relief and assistance received so far from outside agencies could hardly meet the actual requirements.

EGYPT OFFERS MEDIATION

At the Fourth Islamic Foreign Minister Conference, Egypt has proposed mediation between Bangladesh and Pakistan to end resolve differences and establish peace between the countries. The Conference agreed to the proposal. However, it is reported that Indonesia and Malaysia, which have already recognised Bangladesh, expressed reservations over the decision of the Conference Committee to send a team to the Indian subcontinent to seek settlement of the dispute between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

SOURCES: March 5, 1972 issues of Dainik Bangla, The Daily Ittefaq, Azad, Morning News, The Bangladesh Observer and Purbodesh.

Virus death toll in Iran rises to 77

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Lawmaker Abdolreza Mesri said 23 members of parliament have been infected, according to state TV-affiliated website YJC. He did not specify when they had been infected, reports Reuters.

"Meetings between people and the representatives have been temporarily stopped," Mesri was quoted as saying.

Iran announced on February 19 its first two deaths from the coronavirus in Qom, a centre for Islamic studies and pilgrims from abroad.

It now has the highest death toll for any country outside China, where the virus has killed more than 2,900 people since late December.

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called on Iranians to stick to hygiene guidelines to prevent the novel coronavirus from spreading.

"The health care guidelines for preventing infection from this virus should be observed," Khamenei, who was wearing gloves as he planted a tree, said on state television.

The supreme leader said Iran was being transparent with its figures on the outbreak and accused other countries of trying to conceal them.

UK SETS OUT 'BATTLE PLAN' Britain unveiled its "battle plan" to tackle the spread of coronavirus yesterday, warning that as many as a fifth of employees could be off work at the peak of the outbreak.

The United Kingdom has so far confirmed 51 cases of the virus, also known as COVID-19, and Prime Minister Boris Johnson said it was "highly likely" the country would see a growing number of cases.

The government's plan includes possible school closures, home working and cancelling large-scale gatherings to slow the spread of the outbreak. Businesses could be given extra time to pay their taxes if they are facing short-term, cash flow issues.

"This is a national challenge ... I think we'll get through it in very good shape," Johnson told a news conference alongside England's Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty and the

government's Chief Scientific Adviser Patrick Vallance.

The government said its strategy was aimed at delaying the peak of the outbreak until the summer when the health service is under less seasonal pressure. This would also allow more time for the possible development of vaccines.

Options include discouraging unnecessary travel as part of what it called a "social distancing" strategy, delaying non-urgent healthcare, and drafting in retired healthworkers.

S KOREA DECLARES 'WAR'

South Korean President Moon Jae-in declared "war" against the coronavirus yesterday, as the country reported its biggest daily case increase to date, sending its total past 5,000 -- the largest in the world outside China.

The central bank has warned of a contraction in the first quarter for the world's 12th-largest economy, noting the epidemic will hit both consumption and exports.

Moon said the government will inject more than 30 trillion won (\$25 billion) into the economy to address the "grave" situation brought on by the outbreak.

"The entire country has entered a war with the infectious disease," Moon said, ordering all government agencies to operate around the clock.

South Korea confirmed 851 new cases yesterday, taking the national total to 5,186, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said, adding that two more people had died, raising the toll to 28, reports AFP.

While Italy has locked down towns, other countries have stopped short of imposing mass quarantines and instead have discouraged large gatherings, delayed sporting events and banned arrivals from virus-hit nations.

Twitter told staff across the world to work from home.

The number of cases in India went up to six with an Italian tourist in Jaipur tested positive.

US EYES TREATMENT

The White House, which has been accused of downplaying the threat

from the virus, struck a bullish tone.

Vice President Mike Pence declared that a treatment "could literally be available by this summer, or early fall".

He was likely referring to remdesivir, an antiviral drug developed by the pharmaceutical firm Gilead that has already been used to treat one US patient and was moving toward two expansive final stage trials in Asia.

Pence also announced American pharmaceuticals were forming a consortium to fight the virus, and that South Korea and Italy would screen all their airline passengers bound for the US.

Despite its world-class hospitals and cutting-edge research, the US is viewed as vulnerable to an epidemic because of glaring disparities in healthcare availability, with nearly 28 million people without coverage.

Erupting Indonesian volcano spews massive ash cloud

AFP, Solo

Indonesia's most active volcano Mount Merapi erupted yesterday, shooting a massive ash cloud some 6,000 metres (20,000 feet) in the air which coated nearby communities with grey dust and forced an airport closure.

Ash mixed with sand rained down on towns as far as 10 kilometres (six miles) from the belching crater near Indonesia's cultural capital Yogyakarta.

"There was a thundering noise for at least five minutes and I could see the ash clouds from my house," Jarmaji, a resident of Boyolali regency, told AFP.

Authorities did not raise the rumbling volcano's alert status, but they temporarily shuttered the international airport in Solo city -- also known as Surakarta -- some 40 kilometres away after the early morning eruption.

Tears of salt farmers

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the price is low.

Sodium chloride is the chemical name of salt whereas sodium sulphate is mainly used in the manufacture of detergents, industrial dyes, and paper pulp.

According to a recent business report in The Daily Star, salt farmers and millers demanded a three-fold increase in the import duty on sodium sulphate, which is imported and sold locally in the guise of salt.

Sarwar Hossain, deputy general manager of the extension department of Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), said some millers have a stockpile of a large amount of edible salt that were imported two years ago.

Thus, they are not buying salt from local farmers, resulting in the price drop, he added.

Md Hannan Mia, president of Cox's Bazar Labon Chashi Samity, said the millers are untidely manipulating the price of salt.

Kabir Ahmed, president of Bangladesh Salt Industries Owners' Association, refuted the allegation of collusion and blamed the import of edible salt for the price fall.

"This import manipulation is also causing a huge loss to many millers," he said, demanding the government strictly enforce the ban.

According to the National Salt Policy 2016, the only exceptions to the ban are in case annual production fails to meet local demand owing to natural disasters, said Sarwar. Ninety percent import duty is also applied.

According to the data of Bangladesh Bank, 22.83 lakh metric tonnes of various types of salt was imported in fiscal 2015-16, 18.44 lakh metric tonnes in 2016-17, 22.52 lakh metric tonnes in 2017-18, and 7.58 lakh

metric tonnes in 2018-19.

The BSCIC says the demand for salt for industrial use is around 9.5 lakh metric tonnes a year.

Salt is produced in 60,796 acres of land in various upazilas of Cox's Bazar, where hundreds of thousands of people depend directly or indirectly on the salt trade for their livelihoods.

Salt is produced six months a year, between November and May, in the country.

In the last season, production of salt was 18.24 lakh metric tonnes against a demand of 16.57 lakh metric tonnes, said Shamim Alam, extension officer of salt development office of BSCIC in Cox's Bazar.

This season, a total of around four lakh metric tonnes of salt have already been produced while the production target is 18.49 lakh metric tonnes, he added.

According to BSCIC, there are 213 salt centres across the country.

BSCIC officials said the production cost of salt is high in the country as farmers spend almost 60 percent of it in order to lease land.

But things are different in neighbouring India, they said, adding that salt farmers in Gujarat and Chennai use government land to produce salt.

"The length of their season is eight months while ours is six months. Temperature and humidity are more favourable there," said Shamim.

BSCIC officials, however, believe that the price will soon go up.

"We have already sat with the large millers, who are willing to buy salt directly from the farmers in Cox's Bazar, through a programme on March 6," said Sarwar.

"The price will increase when large millers start buying salt [directly] from the farmers," he added.

Two killed in 'gunfights'

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correspondent.

The OC said yesterday's gunfight took place when a police team conducted a drive at Amanullahpur village to arrest the accused in the case around 3:30am.

Nazrul's family, however, alleged that police picked him up and killed him.

"Sensing presence of law enforcers, a group of Shibir cadres", led by its leader Pias, fired gunshots at police who fired back, triggering the gunfight," OC Harunur said.

Nazrul was hit with bullets and was declared dead after police took him to Noakhali General Hospital. The other Shibir men fled, the OC said.

Police claimed to have recovered a pistol, three bullets and three knives from the spot.

Nazrul's brother Omar Faruk said his brother, a first year Kamil student of a madrasa in Lakshmipur, was involved in Shibir politics but not involved in Rakibul's killing.

"My brother arrived in his lodging's house in Chowmuhani upazila after securing bail from High Court in another case two days ago."

"Two people picked him up from the house around 7:30pm on Monday. Police killed him that night and branded it as a crossfire incident," he said.

"My brother is the victim of political vengeance."

Alamgir Hossain, superintendent of police in Noakhali, denied Omar's allegation and said Nazrul directly

took part in the Rakibul's killing.

Police so far arrested six accused and were trying to arrest the others, he said.

Meanwhile, an alleged robber was killed in a "gunfight" with police in Kushtia's Bheramara upazila.

The dead, identified as Mohon Ali, 35, was a member of a robbery gang accused in at least 14 cases on various charges with different police stations, our Kushtia correspondent reports, quoting police.

The "gunfight" occurred beside the Kushtia-Ishwardi road near Lalon Shah Bridge around 3:00am when a police team conducted a raid in the area, said Mohammad Shahjalal, OC of Bheramara Police Station.

"The gang was preparing for a robbery when they were confronted by police. That's when the gunfight began," the OC said.

Police found Mohon's body when the other robbers fled the scene, he added.

A pistol, two machetes and two rounds of ammunition were recovered from the spot, the OC claimed.

Seeking anonymity, one of Mohon's relatives told our correspondent that Mohon stayed at Daulatpur bordering area and they lost communication with him a long time ago.

"We were informed that police in plainclothes detained Mohon from a Daulatkhali bordering area on Monday."

When asked, OC (investigation) Mohammad Zahurul Islam of Bheramara Police Station denied the allegation.

5.4 lakh tonnes

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that some 1.44 lakh tonnes of coal disappeared from its yard.

However, the commission said the actual amount of misappropriated coal was 5.48 lakh tonnes.

Although the commission didn't officially make any estimate about how much the scam was worth, several members of the commission after the briefing told The Daily Star that the government had to incur a loss of several hundred crores of taka due to the swindle.

At the briefing, Syed Maksud said they would hand over their report to the CAB, and then CAB would submit it to the government.

On July 21, 2019, Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) pressed charges against 23 officials of BCMCL, including seven former managing

directors, in a case filed over misappropriation of over 1.43 lakh tonnes of coal.

The estimated market price of the coal is over Tk 243 crore which was embezzled between January 2006 and July 19, 2018.

The matter came to light on July 17, 2018, when a board member of Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) visited the BCMCL coal yard of to find out whether it had enough reserve to help run the three units of Barapukuria coal-fired power plant.

The plant, with a combined capacity of 525 megawatts, had to be shut down due to the coal crisis. The state-run BPDB is the biggest coal consumer of BCMCL.

The coal yard was supposed to hold 1,47,000 tonnes in July 2018 but only 3,000-tonne coal was found.

UN body to move

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He added, "We are clear that the CAA is constitutionally valid and complies with all requirements of our constitutional values. It is reflective of our long standing national commitment in respect of human rights issues arising from the tragedy of the Partition of India."

Kumar further said India is a democracy governed by the rule of law. "We all have utmost respect for and full trust in our independent judiciary. We are confident that our sound and legally sustainable position would be vindicated by the Supreme Court," he said.

Last week, Bachelet had expressed serious concern at the CAA and riots in Northeast Delhi and called on India's leadership to prevent further violence.

Shortly after it was passed by Parliament in December last year, the United Nations human rights office had described the CAA as "fundamentally discriminatory in nature", and had called for it to be reviewed.

The government said that the CAA was aimed at protecting minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, but the UN body noted that the law "does not extend the same protection to Muslims, including minority sects".

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) too appealed to the Trump administration for action. It had earlier asked the Trump administration to consider sanctions against India's top leadership if the law was approved.