

Pirates' ransom to be settled in a week

Say owners of hijacked ship

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Officials of the owning and operating companies of the hijacked Bangladeshi ship MV Jahan Moni yesterday hoped to settle ransom negotiations with Somali pirates within a week.

They also claimed that a good progress had been made during negotiations with the pirates on Wednesday night.

After settling the ransom through negotiations, it would take 10 to 14 days more to complete the formalities of their release, they said.

Earlier the pirates threatened to kill 26 Bangladeshis on board if the ship owner failed to meet their ransom demand by yesterday.

Most of the abducted crew conveyed the threat to their families in Bangladesh over the phone on Wednesday night.

The panicked families of the crew rushed to the office of the owning company SR Shipping Ltd at Agrabad around 11:00am yesterday to convey the threat message to the officials.

Mid Shahjahan, managing director of SR Shipping, and Meherul Karim, general manager of the ship's operating company Brave Royal Ship Management Ltd, consoled the family members saying that death threat is a 'strategy to create pressure on the crew'.

During a meeting with the families of the crew, Shahjahan said, "We are in talks with the pirates and the negotiation is in the final stage."

"If everything goes well, the ship along with the crew would be released within 10 to 14 days," Meherul said.

Referring to Wednesday's discussion with the pirates, Meherul said the leader of the pirates went to the ship yesterday to settle the ransom amount following discussion with other pirates.

Engine Cadet Shahriar Rabbi phoned his mother Bilkis Rahman around 2:30am yesterday and said that the pirates had threatened to kill all of them if the ship owner fails to meet their demand by Thursday.

Electrical Engineer Shahab Alam phoned his wife Afroza Akhter around 1:30am and alleged that the officials of the owning company were delaying the negotiation with the pirates.

Regarding the allegation, Meherul said that they are now bargaining not to reduce the ransom amount rather to get assured whether the negotiator for the pirates is a real one.

Citing an example, he said two ships were not released even after paying the ransom.

Execution rate in Iran alarms UN human rights chief

CNN ONLINE

The head of human rights for the United Nations has expressed alarm at the number of executions carried out by Iran in the new year.

"We have urged Iran, time and again, to halt executions," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said. "I am very dismayed that instead of heeding our calls, the Iranian authorities appear to have stepped up the use of the death penalty."

At least 66 people were executed during January, according to Iranian media reports. Most of the executions were reportedly carried out for drug offences, although at least three involved political prisoners, a UN statement said.

Khaleda seeks

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During a meeting with Khaleda at her Gulshan office last night, all the parties assured her of actively taking part in the countrywide hartal.

"We have discussed various issues like hartal and anti-government movement with the BNP chairperson. We will discuss it in our party forum to finalise our decision regarding taking part in the hartal," said ATM Azharul Islam, acting secretary general of Jamaat-e-Islami.

The former premier first sat with Jamaat's acting chief Maqbul Ahmed, acting Secretary General ATM Azharul Islam and city unit leader Hamidur Rahman Azad. BNP standing committee member Nazrul Islam Khan and Senior Joint Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir were also present in the meeting.

Meeting sources said they discussed the latest political situation. Jamaat leaders urged the BNP chairperson for a coordinated movement against the ruling Awami League-led government.

Khaleda requested Jamaat leaders to ensure active participation of Jamaat in the hartal and Jamaat leaders assured her of this.

Later, the BNP chairperson sat with the leaders of smaller parties like Khelafat Majlish, Jappa, Nap, Labour Party, Muslim League and Islamic party.

BNP Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain yesterday, however, said the party might consider withdrawing the hartal for Monday, only if the government meets all its demands.

"The hartal has been called to protest a number of issues including the share market scandal and price hike of essentials," he said when asked about the possibility of calling off the hartal since the government backtracked on its plan to build an airport on Arial Beel in Munshiganj.

The BNP leader was talking to reporters at the party's Naya Paltan office after a meeting with party leaders to make the dawn-to-dusk hartal a success.

"We did not call the hartal only to stop the government from constructing an airport on Arial Beel," he said.

He hoped the government would not use the law enforcement agencies to thwart the hartal.

Delwar said the government must take all responsibilities for any unpleasant event stemmed from obstruction by the authorities.

The party called the countrywide hartal at a rally at Muktangan on Wednesday in protest at the filing of a case against party chief Khaleda Zia on charge of instigating violence in Arial Beel.

Ruling party leader Abdul Matin, also public prosecutor in Munshiganj, filed the lawsuit against the BNP chairperson on Tuesday.

The BNP secretary general with newly elected Habiganj-1 lawmaker Sheikh Sujat Miah placed floral wreaths and offered feteah at the grave of party's founder Ziaur Rahman in the morning.

He told reporters that the locals in Munshiganj "forged a movement against the government plan to build an airport in Arial Beel."

"No feasibility study was done before choosing the site for an airport," he said.

The BNP leader questioned how a public prosecutor could file a lawsuit against the leader of the opposition.

Our reply

FROM PAGE 1

communicate to our readers how the ministry failed to respond to issues we had raised in our report.

First, the rejoinder quotes the state minister on the price hike of iron rods where he placed stress on the huge economic and social consequences on the industry and the workers in this sector.

The ship-breaking industry in Sitakunda, according to the Ship Breakers Association itself, meets about 25 percent of the country's demand for iron. That iron is of low quality and, according to Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, it is unfit for solid construction of a structure.

The rejoinder claimed that the minister compared the situation to the work of an evil genie and did not cast any doubt on the work of the High Court. "The Hon'ble Minister did not say anything about the influence on Hon'ble High Court. However, the reporter indicated this."

The Daily Star has obtained the video copy of the speech in which the minister says, (quote verbatim) "..... The sector has fallen into the hands of an evil genie..... this evil genie prowls the corridors of the High Court ... therefore (sutorang) all problems arise from this..."

His statement directly implies that the evil genie's presence in the High Court influences justice for which the ship-breaking industry is facing problems. We all know the High Court recently stopped all activities of ship breaking until new rules are set in accordance with environmental protection and workers' safety rules.

The rejoinder claims, "The Ship Breakers Association is not included in the technical committee but they were consulted in formulating the rules as relevant stakeholder." This is a deliberate distortion of fact. The Daily Star has obtained a minute of the High Powered Committee's meeting held on March 15, 2010. The minute, signed by the secretary of the same ministry, Mihir Kanti Majumder clearly says that as per decision of the meeting two representatives of the Ship Breakers Association are hereby co-opted in the High Powered Committee. More interestingly, the minute shows that those members who had objected to the inclusion of representatives from the Ship Breakers Association were not present in the meeting.

The rejoinder claimed, "In order to preserve the interest of workers of ship-breaking industry, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) was consulted in formulating the rules." The

Daily Star contacted the BILS office yesterday. Assistant Executive Director of BILS Sultan Uddin Ahmed said they were never consulted with by anyone regarding formulating any rules. "I can confirm that nobody from the Ministry of Environment and Forests ever contacted us on this issue," he said.

The issuance of 60 conditional Environment Clearance Certificates to ship-breaking yards by the Department of Environment is a direct violation of the High Court order of November 4, 2010 in which the High Court clearly said there is no provision in law to issue conditional clearance and hence no such clearance can be given.

The rejoinder finally says that the Ministry of Environment and Forests did not issue any permission for ship importing and beaching because it does not deal with the matter.

We are absolutely stupefied by this attitude of shrugging responsibility as it is untrue and self-contradictory. The involvement of the Department of Environment starts from the very onset of ship-breaking activities. As soon as the ship, meant for scrapping, enters Bangladesh territory it has to produce a Pre-cleaning Certificate issued by the original seller. The DoE then, on the basis of physical inspection, issues the Environmental Certificate. The High Court directive also prohibits beaching a ship without environmental clearance. Are we to think that the DoE failed to notice the dubious Pre-cleaning Certificates (PCC) issued by a single person working for three different companies on the Virgin Islands signing three different PCCs for three different types of ships in eight days. The rejoinder does not shed any light on this issue.

In conclusion, we would like to say that to brush aside objective and fact-based newspaper report as "politically motivated, biased, misleading, concocted, and subjective" does not serve any public interest. We urge respective ministries to take investigative reports of serious newspapers with due respect that they deserve; name-calling only reveals the bankruptcy of the ministerial position. Unnecessarily a situation of conflict is being deliberately created with environmental workers and non-government organisations who are trying to ensure that our environment is protected and the rights of the workers restored. Only a handful of countries allow ship breaking on their soil. Here we can see the potential of the sector. We want the industry to thrive but only by compliance to the law of the land.

False promise

FROM PAGE 1

to protest the police action three days earlier. The Students' Action Committee decided to call a general strike on the day the assembly would meet. It was such a move on the part of the students which compelled the government to soften its stance on the language issue. Moreover, Pakistan's founder and Governor General Mohammad Ali Jinnah, popularly known as Quaid-e-Azam, was scheduled to visit the province beginning March 19. The provincial government was, therefore, not willing to leave anything to chance lest the visit be disrupted.

The leading figures of the Action Committee met Khwaja Nazimuddin in the morning on March 15 before the assembly session got underway. They included Professor Abul Kashem, Kamruddin Ahmed, Mohammad Toaha, Naimuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam and Abdur Rahman Chowdhury. Desperate about ensuring a peaceful atmosphere during Jinnah's visit, Nazimuddin reached an eight-point deal with the students. The salient features of the agreement were a) all those who had been arrested over the preceding one month in connection with the language protests would be freed b) the provin-

cial assembly would adopt a resolution in early April in favour of having Bangla as one of the two state languages of Pakistan as well as one of the languages employed in the Constituent Assembly c) steps would be taken for English to be replaced by Bangla in courts and offices throughout the province and d) restrictions imposed under the provisions of Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code would be withdrawn.

On March 16, all those who had been arrested on March 11 were freed from prisons in Dhaka and elsewhere. But in April Khwaja Nazimuddin would renege on his pledge of having the provincial assembly pass a resolution proposing Bangla as one of the two state languages of Pakistan. It would lead to a fresh new crisis in East Bengal, of course. But that was to be weeks later. Meanwhile, Governor General Jinnah arrived in Dhaka on March 19, 1948 for what would turn out to be his first and last visit to Pakistan's eastern province. On March 21, he addressed a large crowd at the Dhaka Race Course, where he sounded a warning against what he called the forces of subversion and conspiracy bent on destroying the unity of Pakistan. Feeble protests were heard from the crowd. Far louder voices of protest were to be heard only days later.



Enthusiastic children going through books at a stall of the Ekushey Bô Mela at Bangla Academy yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Kids' presence adorns fair

RAKIB AHAMMED

Six-year-old Arnob, accompanied by his father, was browsing books at Amar Ekushey Bô Mela on the premises of Bangla Academy yesterday afternoon searching for his favourite read.

After hunting through a couple of stalls at the children's corner, Arnob, who also visited the fair last year, finally bought two books, said his father Amir Hossain.

"I have bought two comic books of Meena and now I am looking for a book on ghost stories," said Arnob.

Like previous years, Bangla Academy has dedicated a spot on its premises for children's books, exclusively. As many as 25 colourful stalls dedicated to the young readers have been set up in the corner.

Suborna Rayhan, a seller in Adiganto stall said they are selling a good number of children's books everyday. Books containing comic strips and vibrant

pictures usually attract the little readers, he added.

Parents, however, expressed concern over the quality and contents of the new books for children.

"Most of the books are based on foreign cartoon characters like the Superman, Spiderman and computer games and hardly reflect our own culture," said a disappointed parent.

Murshid Anwar, deputy director of Bangla Academy said they have allocated a corner for stalls for the publishers of children's books so that it is convenient for the parents to look for books for their little ones.

Meanwhile, the fair witnessed a larger crowd yesterday than the last two days.

The sellers are expecting a huge inflow of buyers today, the first Friday since the fair began. The gates of the fair will open today at 11:00am.

Academy officials said special measures have been taken to manage the huge crowd on the premises.

Airport on other bank of Padma

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The ruling Awami League president also spoke on various issues including political situation in the country, recently held municipal polls and parliamentary by-elections, extra judicial killings, price hike of essentials, sharemarket scam and gas and electricity outage.

ELECTIONS

"We have proved that credible elections can be held under a political government if it remains respectful to democracy and voting right of people," the PM said.

"Even after losing Habiganj seat... we have accepted the polls verdict. But why cannot the opposition accept the results of Brahmanbaria by-polls that saw them defeated?" said the AL chief.

The prime minister demanded introduction of electronic voting for free and fair polls in the country. **NEW AIRPORT**

The premier said in the next 10 years, the number of flights at Shahjalal International Airport would be over one lakh a year. This airport will not be able to handle such a large number of flights even after its massive renovation.

She added the concept of a new airport, which is a must for the next generation, was developed during her party's tenure in 1996-2001.

The earlier decision of building an airport in an area that includes acres of agricultural land and part of the wetland Arial Beel in Munshiganj provoked anger of locals.

Their clash with police on Monday left a sub-inspector dead and more than 100 people injured.

The premier also pledged to turn Cox's Bazar domestic airport into an international one so that tourists from abroad can directly fly to the sea beach town.

She alleged the unrest and the police murder in Munshiganj were "designed to deter development as well as create chaos".

EXTRA JUDICIAL KILLINGS

Asked why these killings have not been stopped even after her government promised, the premier said her government is against the practice.

"But how can the practice of crossfire that started during BNP-Jamaat rule be stopped overnight?" she said.

She said her government will probe such killings and ensure punishment to persons responsible.

PRICE HIKE

The prime minister said the price hike of rice even in harvest season is artificial and the opposition men might have a hand in it. The government was trying to check the price rise of essentials, she said.

STOCKMARKET

The premier said the opposition might have plotted the capital market plunge prior to the local body elections with a motive that people turn against the AL candidates.

She said her government has already formed a committee to probe the scam.

MIDDLE-EAST

Sheikh Hasina said her government has been observing the situation and does not want to make any comment that might harm diplomacy.

THE OPPOSITION

Hasina said what was the justification for the February 7 hartal called by the opposition when Khaleda's demands were met?

On opposition leader's comment that a middle-east like situation would be created in the country, she said it would not be possible to topple a government that has people's mandate.

Responding to the BNP chief's claim that this is the weakest government ever, she said, "Yes, we are very weak when it comes to plundering people's wealth, corruption and criminal activities. Otherwise, we are doing fine."

She said "The opposition leader should get ready for the corruption charges against her and her family

Egypt opposition

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On the other hand, Mubarak in an interview with ABC television said he wants to leave office, but fears there will be chaos if he resigns now.

The beleaguered Egyptian leader said he was "fed-up with being president and would like to leave office now, but cannot... for fear that the country would sink into chaos," ABC's Christiane Amanpour said, after interviewing Mubarak.

Mubarak, who has vowed not to stand in upcoming elections, has come under increasing pressure from the United States and the West to step down amid 10 days of violent protests against his 30-year rule.

Meanwhile, Egyptian army tanks and soldiers cleared away pro-government rioters, and deployed between them and protesters seeking the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, as the prime minister made an unprecedented apology yesterday for the assault by regime backers that turned central Cairo into a battle zone.

Shafiq told state TV that the attack Wednesday on the anti-government protesters was a "blatant mistake" and promised to investigate who was behind it.

"I offer all my apologies for what happened yesterday and there will be an enquiry," Shafiq told state television as the fighting on Tahrir Square raged for a second day with at least seven people dead.

Shafiq, who became premier after Mubarak sacked the government in a bid to quell the protests, said earlier that the deadly unrest would be investigated, amid allegations that plain clothes police were involved.

The army stood by as Mubarak supporters attacked their anti-regime opponents, using guns, petrol bombs, sticks and rocks.

Shafiq later told journalists that he was unsure whether the attacks had been organised.

"I don't know if it was organised or spontaneous," he said during a televised news conference.

"There were clashes. And clashes between youths are always more heated. It seems they were carrying some weapons."

"Egyptian hearts are bleeding," he said. "It was a bloody night, with much damage."

The military began to move with muscle for the first time to stop the fighting early

yesterday after a barrage of automatic gunfire hit the anti-government camp before dawn, killing at least three protesters in a serious escalation.

Four tanks cleared a highway overpass from which Mubarak supporters had hurled rocks and firebombs onto the protesters. Soldiers on the streets carrying rifles lined up between the two sides around 11:00am. Several hundred other soldiers were moving toward the frontline.

More protesters streamed into the square yesterday morning, joining the thousands of defenders who spent the chilly night there, hunkered down against the thousands of government supporters in the surrounding streets.

A sense of victory ran through the protesters, even as they organised their ranks in the streets in case of a new assault. "Thank God, we managed to protect the whole area," said Abdul-Rahman, a taxi driver who spent the night in the square. "We prevented the pro-Mubarak people from storming the streets leading to the square." He refused to give his full name.

The apology by Shafiq, who was appointed by Mubarak over the weekend, was highly unusual from a leadership that rarely makes public admissions of a mistake. His promise to investigate who organised the attack came only hours after the Interior Ministry issued a denial that any of its police were involved.

"I offer my apology for everything that happened yesterday because it's neither logical nor rational," Shafiq said. "What happened was wrong, a million percent wrong, whether it was deliberate or not deliberate ... Everything that happened yesterday will be investigated so everyone knows who was behind it."

The notion that the state may have coordinated violence against protesters, whose vigil in Tahrir Square had been peaceful for days, prompted a sharp rebuke from Washington, which has considered Egypt its most important Arab ally for decades, and sends it \$1.5 billion a year in aid.

"If any of the violence is instigated by the government, it should stop immediately," said White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs.