

Record civilian death toll in Afghan war last year: UN

AFP, Kabul

A record number of civilians were killed in Afghanistan's decade-long war in 2011 -- the fifth straight year the death toll has risen, the United Nations reported yesterday.

A total of 3,021 civilians died -- mostly at the hands of insurgents -- up eight percent from 2,790 in 2010, the UN mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said in its annual report.

The report stands in contrast to an upbeat assessment of 2011 as "remarkably successful" by Nato-led forces, who are preparing to withdraw combat troops in 2014 and hand security over to the Afghan government.

Shun path of destruction

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International Conference Centre.

She also held Khaleda responsible for the killing of five people in recent violence.

Directing the BCL members to remain alert to foil any conspiracy against the country's democracy, Hasina said, "A vested quarter has been hatching conspiracy since the government started trying the war criminals and the corrupt."

The prime minister asked Khaleda, also the BNP chairperson, not to try to protect the war criminals as their trial has become a popular demand now. "The war criminals will surely be tried on this soil and none will be able to protect them," she insisted.

Regarding the formation of the new Election Commission (EC), she said

her government has set up an example of being impartial as it did not form the EC on its own. Rather a search committee will do the job, she noted.

The three-member committee was formed following a presidential dialogue with major political parties on this issue.

The AL chief urged the BCL leaders and activists to concentrate on studies and character building in the light of the organisation's three mottoes -- education, peace and progress -- to establish a prosperous Bangladesh.

"To this end, you must work with honesty and dedication to sustain the glorious tradition of the organisation and prepare yourself to lead the nation in future," maintained Hasina.

The premier directed the

BCL leaders to take stern action against those committing crime under the banner of the organisation. "You must remain alert so that no opportunist can enter into the organisation as they try to pursue personal interests during the tenures of all the governments."

Former BCL leaders Tofail Ahmed, Obaidul Quader, Abdur Mannan, Abdur Rahman, Mostafa Jalal Mohiuddin, Jahangir Kabir Nanak, Mainuddin Hasan Chowdhury, Enamul Haque Shamim, Bahadur Bepari, Liaquat Sikder, Mahmud Hasan Ripon and Mahfuzul Haider Chowdhury Roton, among others, also spoke.

BCL President HM Badiuzzaman Sohag chaired the function, while its General Secretary Siddique Nazmul Alam moderated.

Names for next EC to be finalised

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commissioner and one of the two election commissioners yesterday completed their tenure in the EC. The remaining commissioner will complete his tenure on February 14.

Sources said the president might form the EC on February 8 or 9.

Of the 24 political parties that had talks with the president on the issue, a total of six, including the ruling Awami League, have sent names in response to the committee's call.

Apart from the AL, Workers Party of Bangladesh, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Jatiya Party (JP-Manju), Ganatantri Party, and Bangladesh Tariqat Federation have sent names to the search committee.

The committee on January 25 urged the parties to recommend five people

by January 29. As no party was able to send any names by that time, the deadline was extended by two more days.

The committee did not use any formal channel to communicate with the parties, thus keeping space for any questions that might be raised. It only urged the parties through news media to do the job.

Many political parties, including the six that submitted names, reacted sharply to the process.

The president held dialogues with 24 political parties from December 22 last to January 12 this year seeking their opinions about reconstitution of the commission.

Many political parties proposed to form a search committee while some others including the main

opposition BNP demanded restoration of the caretaker government system first. After the dialogues, BNP rejected the search committee while the ruling party hailed it.

Outgoing Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda also welcomed the presidential move for formation of a search committee.

The president asked the committee to place its recommendations within 10 working days from its formation on January 22. Tomorrow is the last working day to accomplish its job.

BNP Standing Committee Member MK Anwar told The Daily Star yesterday that formation of EC through the search committee will deepen the existing political crisis. He said an EC under a political government cannot

hold free and fair elections without restoration of caretaker system.

Akbar Ali Khan, former adviser to a caretaker government, said although many parties did not recommend names, the outcome of the search committee's work could turn out right. He, however, said there might have questions on the process of formation of the committee.

"Until we know who are going to be appointed as election commissioners, it's very difficult to draw any conclusion."

Due to a "positive approach" by the last caretaker government, the present EC could do some good works, continuation of which depended on the present government's attitude, he said replying to a query.

BSF arrests

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Lt Col Abu Basit, commanding officer of 38 Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) Battalion, confirmed that the arrestees were Bangladeshis. One of the three was identified as Zahur Islam.

Injured cattle trader Kabirul Islam is from Amudia village, India.

Soon after the incident, the BGB authorities sent a letter to BSF protesting the arrests and demanding release of the Bangladeshis.

In response, a company-level flag meeting between BSF and BGB was held at zero point near Baikari yesterday afternoon.

BSF had arrested the Bangladeshis after they had attacked and injured Sartaz Singh and Zindar Pal of Khalisha camp, said BSF officials.

The Indian side at the meeting refused to hand over the arrestees to the BGB authorities. Then another flag meeting between 38 BGB Battalion and 152 BSF Battalion was held, which also could not come to a decision.

Vitamin-A rich rice gets nod

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gave the go-ahead in response to the research institute's request made in April last year.

Golden Rice, widely acclaimed for its perceived potential to fight vitamin A deficiency in expecting mothers and children, is now set to go through greenhouse trials and field tests before advancing into production phase. Vitamin A deficiency causes blindness and child death in acute cases.

According to the World Health Organisation's global database on vitamin A deficiency, one in every five preschool children in Bangladesh is vitamin A deficient, and 23.7 percent of pregnant women are affected by vitamin A deficiency.

BRI Principal Plant Breeder Dr Alamgir Hossain told this correspondent, "After getting government approval, we have already asked for seeds from the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines. Expectantly, we

will be getting the seeds soon and go for trial production of the Golden Rice in transgenic greenhouse at BIRRI by next week."

Once the greenhouse trial succeeds, he said, BIRRI will go for trial in the open field under controlled environment on its campus.

Dr Alamgir said once released commercially, consumption of only 150 gram of Golden Rice a day will supply half of the recommended daily allowance (RDA) of vitamin A for an adult. This is expected to revolutionise fighting vitamin A deficiency in the mostly rice-eating Asian countries where the poor have limited access to vitamin A sources other than rice.

Bangladesh's most productive rice variety -- BIRRI Dhan-29 -- along with an IRRI variety IR-64 and a Filipino variety RC-28 have gone through the process in which these were genetically engineered to have greater expressions of corn gene responsible for producing

beta carotene, a source of vitamin A.

And in February last year, trials on the Los Banos campus in the Philippines, IRRI got good results from these Golden Rice varieties including the transgenic BIRRI Dhan-29.

Sources said there have been months of wrangling over biosafety concerns about conducting trial of transgenic rice. Though the BIRRI plea for the trial got almost immediate approval from the agriculture ministry, the go-ahead came from the environment ministry only last month.

In agriculture, biosafety refers to measures taken to reduce the risk of bacterial contamination of food and its containing any unwanted spread or mix-up of alien genes.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury said the government is open to application of biotechnology in agriculture sector. "We've no objection to such

trials with biosafety issues well taken care of."

The transgenic technology in rice was first applied by Prof Ingo Potrykus, then at the Institute for Plant Sciences of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, and Prof Peter Beyer of the University of Freiburg, Germany. Their insertion of beta carotene-enriched gene from daffodil to rice caught world attention back in late '90s, and the rice became known as Golden Rice.

After years of scientific research and experiments, IRRI found it more rewarding to transfer the beta carotene gene to rice from corn than daffodil.

On April 13 last year Seattle-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation sanctioned a grant of over \$10 million to IRRI to fund, develop and evaluate Golden Rice varieties for Bangladesh and the Philippines. The Foundation expects that Golden Rice variety of BIRRI Dhan-29 will be ready for

regulatory approval by 2015.

Alamgir, who had worked with former IRRI biotechnologist Swapan K Datta, however, said, "We will be able to make our home-grown Golden Rice ready for seeking approval much ahead of 2015 if the government, particularly the regulators, take a pro-active role in finishing the safety trial processes quickly."

Bangladesh-born researcher Swapan was the first to infuse daffodil's beta carotene-producing gene into BIRRI Dhan-29 nearly 10 years back.

IRRI and Gates Foundation officials, contacted through e-mail, confirmed that as the Golden Rice inventors and subsequent technology developer Syngenta allowed a royalty-free access to the patents, the new rice when released for commercial farming in Bangladesh will be of the same price as other rice, and farmers will be able to share and replant the seeds as they wish.

'Urdu is Islamic'

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something of a fiasco. His threat of Urdu alone being the state language of Pakistan led to protestations of 'No, no' from a part of the audience. For the very first time in his life, Jinnah faced a condition where his pronouncement had been challenged. He appeared somewhat surprised at such an intervention.

Observe the following excerpts from Jinnah's address:

"Our enemies, among whom I regret to say, there are still some Muslims, have set about actively encouraging provincialism in the hope of weakening Pakistan and thereby facilitating the re-absorption of this province into the Indian Dominion. Those who are playing this game are living in a fool's paradise, but this does not prevent them trying..."

Let me restate my views on the question of a state language for Pakistan. For official use in this province, the people of the province can choose any language they wish... There can, however, be one lingua franca,

that is, the language for inter-communication between the various provinces of the state, and that language should be Urdu and cannot be any other. The state language, therefore, must obviously be Urdu, a language that has been nurtured by a hundred million Muslims of this sub-continent, a language understood throughout the length and breadth of Pakistan and, above all, a language which, more than any other provincial language, embodies the best that is in Islamic culture and Muslim tradition and is nearest to the languages used in other Islamic countries. . . . Make no mistake about it. There can be only one state language if the component parts of this state are to march forward in unison and that language, in my opinion, can only be Urdu."

Postscript: On February 5, 1966, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman publicly announced the Six Point programme for regional autonomy at a conference of Pakistan's leading opposition parties in Lahore.

A silent transformation

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The department proposed to Siraj and 500 others like him that it would amicably resolve the cases against them. But in return they would have to give up illegal logging and instead patrol the forest.

Those willing to take up the offer would get a generous package of Tk 11,000 for building houses, vegetable cultivation, cattle rearing and bio-fuel plant installation. They would also get 200 saplings and livelihood training.

Sirajuddin turned his back on his old activities and accepted the offer. And then he ran for the Ghuga union parishad elections in Madhupur. And won.

In the lonely Madhupur Sal forest, Sheikh Farid and Amjad Hossain were walking side by side. Attired in bottle

green trousers and shirts, each carried a stick.

A year ago, their presence in the forest would mean only one thing -- some trees had been felled and dragged away. For both of them were illegal loggers.

But today they were here to patrol the forest so that thieves could not hack away the trees.

This is the silent transformation taking place in the highly depleted Madhupur Sal forest today under a forest department project.

The forest that once sprawled across more than 45,000 acres has today shrunk to only 10,000 acres. But this is official data. The actual forest coverage is even smaller. The corruption of forest officials and indiscriminate theft have left it barren, a mere shadow of its earlier self.

"I used to enter the forest with my team members almost every week and chop down 10 to 20 trees a night," Farid says. "I would get about Tk 2,000 to Tk 3,000 a week from the wood traders who would hire us."

On the face of it, illegal logging should have made Amjad and Farid quite well off. But it did not.

"The traders always wanted to keep us under their influence. They did not want us to be well off," explains Amjad. "So they would influence the police and the forest department to file cases against us and get us arrested."

Once arrested, they would spend about three months in jail at a stretch. Or they would be on the run in fear of arrest. And the same traders would keep on supporting their families with

money and expenses for running the cases. This would make the illegal loggers indebted to the traders.

"And the cost of running cases was going up and we were outcasts in society," says Farid. "Nobody would have his daughter marry the son of a thief."

It was also a tipping point for the Madhupur Sal forest. From an original 40,000 acres it had shrunk to a mere 10,000 acres, much of it from illegal logging and encroachment. Only in Rasulpur there are five brick kilns that would use firewood from the forest.

"Every day, hundreds of rickshaw vans loaded with firewood would go to the kilns," said Amjad. "I and others like me would do it."

It is at this moment that the forest department got Tk 15 crore from the climate

change fund and undertook its innovative programme.

"The offenders do not log trees on their own. They do it for the bigwig traders. So I thought if I could cut the loggers off from the traders, the forest could be saved," said Ashit Ranjan Paul, divisional forest official of Tangail.

Ashit began talking to the forest offenders. He told them they could either choose the life of a criminal or give up illegal logging and lead a clean life.

"Interestingly, they all took up the second option to come clean off it," said Ashit.

And today, as you walk through the forest, you go through a new experience. Where there was nothing but chopped off tree stumps, Sal trees have grown as high as 20 feet tall. Babblers, orioles,

monarchs, treepeeps, red-whiskered bulbuls and racket-tailed drongos create a symphony in mixed hunting parties. Meeting a monitor clung to a tree or finding a flock of red jungle fowls foraging along the forest ground is no uncommon scene.

But this effort is just a ripple in the battle to restore the Madhupur forest. The malaise runs deep, raising questions of how to recover the encroached forest land, how to stop the invasion of foreign tree species introduced by the forest department itself, how to make the forest department truly committed to saving the wilderness and how to fight the powerful forest plunderers.

Yet this can be a beginning. A shaft of light has penetrated the forest.

Govt probing

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Addressing the seminar as the chief guest, the law minister stressed the need for holding the war crimes trial to resist religious bigotry, extremism, militancy and terrorism.

He said, "The international communities should extend support for the trial in Bangladesh to establish democracy and rule of law here and in many other countries."

No evil force will be able to stop the trial as the incumbent government does not believe in the culture of impunity, the minister said, adding that religious bigotry, extremism, militancy and terrorism are affecting many countries as perpetrators are instigating

and provoking such crimes.

Those who were involved in killing 30 lakh people, violating two lakh women and committing many other crimes during the Liberation War of Bangladesh are being brought to justice, said Shafique Ahmed.

While some are now in custody for trial, many more will also be brought to book as the investigation agency is carrying out probe into the crimes against humanity in 1971, he said.

State Minister for Law Qamrul Islam, who was also present at the seminar, said trial of some top war crime suspects will be finished by this year while that of the other accused would continue in another tribunal expected to be set up in March.

The BNP-Jamaat alliance is trying to obstruct the ongoing war crimes trial in the name of a movement for restoration of caretaker government system, he said.

According to him, those who are trying to save the war criminals are worse than beasts.

Qamrul said Awami League and its allies will hold such political programmes that the BNP-Jamaat alliance would not be able to move in the capital on March 12.

Rashed Khan Menon said Jamaat has not only spent money to obstruct the war crimes trial but also is spreading propaganda against it on the internet.

He demanded for increasing the number of prosecutors and investigators for completing the trial quickly and fairly.

STPSP President Zakir Ahmed presided over the seminar which was addressed by, among others, SM Rezaul Karim, former secretary of Supreme Court Bar Association, and STPSP's acting secretary Shahidul Islam Khokon.

For Huda, a call of duty

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also been proved that free and fair elections are possible if the EC performs neutrally and upholds its integrity.

Huda assumed the office of chief election commissioner on February 5, 2007 amid a volatile political situation. In face of growing political unrest and street violence, a state of emergency was declared on January 11, 2007. The ninth parliamentary polls, which were scheduled for January 22, were suspended for an indefinite period. A state of emergency regime backed by the armed forces led to the installation of a caretaker government headed by Fakhruddin Ahmed.

Citizens at that point were, nevertheless, skeptical about the holding of the stalled ninth parliamentary polls.

Not only that, when Huda took charge of the EC, it was mired in deep controversy

due to the whimsical and farcical activities carried out under his predecessor, Justice MA Aziz. Moreover, the faulty voter list prepared by the EC fuelled the controversy. In brief, people had lost their confidence in the EC.

"The previous record of the commission was not pleasant. So after being appointed, I was gripped by fear about my fate," recalled outgoing Election Commissioner Sohul Hussein yesterday. Sohul was appointed as election commissioner along with Huda.

Five years on, the EC presents a completely different picture. It has restored people's confidence in it and accomplished many challenging tasks. But the journey has not been smooth. It faced many difficulties as it went ahead doing its job.

At one point, it looked about to be drawn into new controversy in connection

with the split in the BNP. It invited the Saifur Rahman-led faction of the BNP to the electoral reform talks in 2008. Subsequently, however, it was able to emerge clear of its problems by inviting the Khaleda Zia-led BNP to the talks.

As people's confidence in the EC prior to Huda's taking over was at zero level, they could not initially trust the now outgoing Election Commission when it came up with its plan for preparing a voter list with photographs in 2007. Many were skeptical that the EC had taken up an "impossible" task of preparing a voter list with photographs in order to delay the parliamentary polls.

To convince people that the new EC meant business, CEC Huda in July 2007 came up with an electoral roadmap. It specified the timeframe for completing the tasks it had before it, including the preparation of

voter list with photographs, electoral reforms, and holding the stalled parliamentary polls at the end of 2008.

On last day of his term, Huda reflected on the growing doubts, when he took over, over the fate of the stalled ninth parliamentary polls in line with the EC's electoral roadmap.

"Let alone people, my wife could not keep faith in my words --- that we were working to hold the stalled ninth parliamentary election. Even between December 10/12 [of 2008], she asked me whether the election was going to be held," CEC Huda recalled.

The clouds across the political sky began to clear only when the EC completed the maximum portion of the task related to the preparation of the voter list in the middle of 2008 and held polls to four city corporations and nine municipalities in August the same year. And finally, all uncertain-

ties were cast aside when the ninth parliamentary polls were held on December 29 of 2008. The election was lauded at home and abroad for its fairness.

The preparation of the almost fault free voter list with photographs also simultaneously gave citizens national identity cards. Bangladesh now owns the largest ever electoral roll database in the world. To be sure, the contributions of the Bangladesh armed forces in the process of the preparation of the voter list with photographs was immense.

The EC under Huda's stewardship was also able to bring about major electoral reforms in the country's history. Political parties which in 2001 had vehemently opposed the registration system agreed to get registered with the EC in 2008. It was a whopping success of the EC that it was able to bring the political

parties under a legal format.

Another significant success of the EC was to bring about changes in the nation's electioneering culture. Along with bringing in sweeping electoral reforms, the EC imposed a ban on processions and rallies during the campaign for any election. Political parties and candidates largely abided by the new provision.

The EC under Huda also gave birth to a new practice on its part of holding consultations with the political parties, non-government organisations and eminent citizens to bring about the desired changes in the country's electoral system.

The EC successfully introduced transparent ballot boxes in all elections held over the past five years. Under Huda's leadership, the EC also finalized some proposals to bring more reforms into electoral laws.