

Opposition returns to Sangsad at last

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minister for law, a former chief justice and an incumbent High Court judge.

Her remarks sparked uproar in the House as treasury bench MPs instantly protested. Without microphone, Awami League MP Fazilatunnesa Bappy was heard shouting, "Shut up... or I will slap you". Her words almost triggered a scuffle between her and BNP MP Shammi Akhtar.

Thanks to the timely intervention of women chamber attendants and some ruling and opposition MPs, an embarrassing situation was averted in the House.

Having stayed away from parliamentary proceedings for 83 consecutive sittings since March last year, opposition leader Khaleda Zia returned to the House yesterday afternoon along with her lawmakers.

Sources said the opposition MPs were earlier asked by Khaleda to play a "constructive" role in the House and not use indecent words in their speeches.

Earlier in the day, the BNP chief held a brief meeting with opposition MPs and advised them to strongly criticise the "poor performance" of ministers and protest the government's various "wrongs".

"Do not remain silent. You will counter, not using abusive words, rather in a constructive way," BNP MP Nazim Uddin Ahmed quoted the BNP chief as saying.

The opposition leader's directives regarding criticism of the government and ministers without using unparliamentary words were initially followed when two BNP MPs, who took part in the discussion on the thanksgiving motion on the president's speech, launched a blistering attack on the government over its "failure" to address various issues.

BNP lawmaker Shaheeduddin Chowdhury Anee blasted the government for its role in "trying to foil" the opposition's March 12 grand rally in the capital. He launched the attack on the government without using any abusive words.

His colleague, Rehana, however, did not comply with the party chief's directive.

After Awami League MP Fazilatunnesa yelled at Rehana threatening to slap her with a hand raised, BNP MP Shammi Akhtar, who sits in front of Fazilatunnesa, in fast pace went towards Fazilatunnesa and forcibly brought the ruling party lawmaker's hand down.

Two female attendants of the chamber rushed there and were seen standing between Fazilatunnesa and Shammi apparently to stop them from fighting. BNP legislator Anee and Awami League's Aslamul Haque then rushed to the scene and were also seen trying to control Fazilatunnesa and Shammi.

Treasury bench Chief Whip Abdus Shahid, Whip ASM Feroz and Opposition Chief Whip Zainul Abdin Farroque joined the efforts to defuse the tension.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and BNP chief Khaleda were present in the House during this unpleasant incident.

Later, taking the floor on a point of order, Chief Whip Abdus Shahid said the opposition MPs had returned to the House to save their membership and ensure their remuneration kept flowing in. He demanded that the Speaker expunge Rehana's entire speech from the proceedings.

She said the BNP MP used indecent and vulgar words and the opposition leader encouraged her by applauding.

WHAT REHANA SAID

The Speaker gave Rehana 12 minutes to speak on the thanksgiving motion but from the very beginning, she used vulgar words.

"You are the godfather of terrorist as terrorists hide under your sari," she said,

hinting at Sheikh Hasina.

Rehana also termed the FBI agents, who came to Dhaka to testify against

Khaleda's son Tarique Rahman in a money laundering case, "witches", "ghosts", "monkeys", "Satan", etc. Khaleda Zia was then seen smiling and thumping her desk in approval quite a few times.

Rehana also said the state minister for law would have to flee the country without his clothes; and when he talks it smells like sewage.

She also accused Sajeeb Wajed Joy, son of Hasina, of doing business with state money.

After Rehana completed her speech, Speaker Abdul Hamid, who was presiding over the sitting, said all indecent and unparliamentarily words would be expunged from the proceedings.

OPPOSITION'S RETURN

Led by Khaleda Zia, opposition MPs of the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh Jatiya Party and Liberal Democratic Party entered the House at

5:12pm yesterday, minutes before the House resumed its business.

Within moments the leader of the House, Sheikh Hasina, entered the chamber.

Khaleda Zia was last in the House on March 15 last year while the BNP-led opposition deputies were last there on March 24 last year.

Yesterday Khaleda left the House before Maghreb prayers.

Earlier, Hamid told the House that he was "very, very" happy at the opposition's return to the House. He also hoped that the House would become lively with the opposition's participation.

Meanwhile, the House yesterday granted 90-day leave to opposition MP Kazi Mofazzal Hossain Kaykobad on health grounds.

The House unanimously gave consent to it when Speaker Abdul Hamid raised the matter.

The Speaker read out a letter from the BNP lawmaker, now under treatment in Singapore, seeking leave.

Khaleda's name

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Pak intelligence agency paying Khaleda Zia Rs 50 million, the BNP yesterday claimed to have a copy of Durrani's statement, which "does not contain Khaleda's name".

Talking to reporters at the party headquarters in the capital, BNP's acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said, "I have the affidavit copy with the full list of those who were named by Durrani. It does not contain names of any individuals outside Pakistan."

He also alleged that an Indian journalist had spread the "rumour that was not even covered by any Pakistan newspaper".

The BNP leader, however, did not specify the time when the statement was made. Durrani has made more than one statement in the court in a petition that alleges ISI rigged the 1990 general elections in Pakistan. The latest came on Wednesday, according to reports.

A March 14 report in Pakistani newspaper The Express Tribune says the statement Durrani made in 1999 is still a classified document.

According to media reports, names of the BNP and its chief cropped up during hearing on the petition over ISI's funding for politicians both "within and outside Pakistan". The intelligence agency had allegedly given the money to the Bangladesh

Nationalist Party for the 1991 parliamentary polls.

BNP sources said the party would talk directly with Durrani with the help of the Pakistan high commission in Dhaka.

A senior leader of the main opposition party said they would send rejoinders to the foreign media that had carried Khaleda's name.

Meanwhile, a close aide to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has told The Daily Star the government will contact the Bangladesh high commission in Islamabad to get a copy of the statement and related documents.

The government will take the initiative in countering the BNP's denial that it received any funds from the ISI, added the premier's aide.

A senior foreign ministry official yesterday said the ministry was yet to receive any directives from government high-ups about seeking documents from the Pakistani court. Nor has the Bangladesh mission in Islamabad communicated anything to Dhaka regarding the alleged admission.

Mahbubul Alam Hanif, joint general secretary of the ruling Awami League, yesterday said the government should probe the allegation and take stern action.

"We take Durrani's statement as true since it was made in court," he told The Daily Star.

Concern over HC rule

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Likewise, he criticised the ongoing political confrontation, saying that it could lead to a rise of forces similar to those of 1/11.

"Earlier, analysts, including politicians, had expressed similar apprehensions, which comes out of the urge to maintain the continuity of democracy. Such apprehensions against the backdrop of the confrontation politics pursued by the two main political parties is not irrational," said the statement.

Citizens think that it is their basic right, which has been recognised in the constitution, to express concerns on any political crisis, and the High Court's responsibility is to protect citizens' fundamental rights to speech and conscience.

"Instead, the court has issued a rule asking the home secretary, IGP of police and police commissioner of Dhaka why sedition charge against Asif Nazrul will not be brought. We think such a step by the High Court is a threat to citizens' free thinking, right to speech and freedom of media," the statement said.

The eminent citizens also said that they noticed with concern that the same bench of the court had taken a number of similar steps on its own or on the basis of appeals.

Those who issued the statement include Prof Muzaffer Ahmad, M Hafizuddin Khan, Dr Badil Alam Majumder, barrister Manzoor Hasan, Mahmudur Rahman Manna, Prof Salahuddin Aminuzzaman, Dr Shahdeem Malik, Nurul Kabir, Prof Pias Karim, Prof Amena Mohsin, Prof Anu Muhammad, Prof Shahnaz Huda, barrister Andaleeb Rahman, Rubana Haque, Prof Dilara Chowdhury, Dr Zafarullah Chowdhury, Shirin Haque, Mizanur Rahman Khan, Abu Sayeed Khan, Monir Haider.

Indian rail minister Trivedi quits

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"I spoke to Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee this [Sunday] morning and she gave a clear-cut direction to me that it was the party's decision I should resign. And I am a [disciplined] soldier... I must obey the party's decision," Trivedi told media persons.

"Since Trinamool Congress was instrumental in making me the railway minister, I thought I should quit by abiding by the party's directive," he said.

Trivedi was understood to have sent his resignation to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Trivedi said he was thank-

ful to Mamata Banerjee to have made him the railway minister and he has "high respect and regard" for her.

The rail budget for the new financial year 2012-13, which starts on April 1 next, was presented in parliament by Trivedi four days ago which, among other things, effect a stiff across-the-board hike in passenger fare, drawing condemnation from Trinamool Congress and Mamata.

On Friday last, Mamata had faxed a letter to Singh seeking the removal of Trivedi and replacing him by her trusted aide Mukul Roy, who is now a junior federal minister

in shipping ministry.

Roy is expected to be the new railway minister with cabinet status.

Trivedi, an industrialist lawmaker who hails from western state of Gujarat, had yesterday said that he wanted a communication in writing from Mamata that she wanted him to quit as railway minister, a demand rejected by Trinamool Congress.

Yesterday, Trivedi said he spoke to Mamata to clear the "confusion" created by flip-flop statements from Trinamool Congress' parliamentary party leader Sudip Bandopadhyay about what the party wanted Trivedi to do.

Dhaka not interested

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the Court of Arbitration," said a senior official of the foreign ministry.

Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka Pankaj Saran on Saturday expressed New Delhi's willingness to discuss and resolve the maritime boundary issue with Bangladesh bilaterally.

Asked whether Dhaka would respond to New Delhi's suggestion for talks, the official, who wanted not to be named, said, "Are you crazy? Why should we go for bilateral discussion with India now? The arbitration process for the settlement is now going ahead and we want to resolve the issue in due course."

The official said Bangladesh had repeatedly asked India to the table for talks before lodging the case on October 8, 2009.

Bangladesh proposed talks even in January, 2010, when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited New Delhi.

Instead of responding to Bangladesh's calls, India drew its line on the map of the Bay of Bengal unfairly and unlawfully and that encouraged Myanmar to do the same, the officials said.

Finding no alternative to resolving the disputes, Bangladesh lodged the cases against India and Myanmar with the two UN courts.

Another foreign ministry official said it would not be at all wise to withdraw the case from the UN court and go for bilateral talks with India as progress has been made in the arbitration process.

"It may be a trap, we should not step into any trap," he said, adding, "The condition of the

coalition government in India seems very vulnerable and this government cannot deliver Bangladesh any good, so we should not make any important decision with India like the maritime boundary issue."

The official cited the examples of the recently signed agreements, including Protocol on Land Boundary Agreement and non-signing of the Teesta water-sharing treaty.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni on Saturday informed the new Indian high commissioner that the arbitration process to settle the maritime boundary issue is going ahead and it would be resolved in due course.

She is expected to make Bangladesh's position clear again at a press conference scheduled for this afternoon.

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