



BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and other political leaders offering prayers at an iftar party at the LD Hall in the parliament yesterday.

PHOTO: COURTESY

7 Bangladeshi crew alive

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from India, Sri Lanka, Iran and Pakistan.

But the release of the abductees has become uncertain as the Malaysian authorities informed that they were unable to use their offices since the ship's owner had already abandoned the vessel.

The foreign ministry said it remained actively engaged with all concerned, both at home and abroad, for speedy release and safe

return of the Bangladeshi crew members.

It said the authorities concerned in Malaysia had been approached as the ship owner is a Malaysian national. The high commissioner of Malaysia in Dhaka had also been called at the ministry and she was asked to use their good offices. Bangladesh High Commission in Nairobi had also been instructed to maintain close liaison with

the UN office for Somalia.

The ministry has urged the media to refrain from any incorrect information, which might complicate the issue further and undermine the efforts by the government.

As of paying ransom to the hijackers, the foreign ministry noted that as a matter of principle, no government, including the government of Bangladesh, can pay ransom to any such case of piracy.

AL skips Khaleda's iftar party

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

In a last-minute decision, ruling Awami League yesterday skipped the iftar party hosted by Opposition Leader and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia.

Party insiders said despite AL President Sheikh Hasina's green signal, everything changed after Communications Minister Obaidul Quader and a few more party leaders had expressed unwillingness to attend the iftar party under the leadership of AL General Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam.

Wishing anonymity, a number of ruling party leaders also blamed lack of harmony within the party for AL's U-turn.

On Friday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina endorsed the idea of attending the party when AL senior leaders including Syed Ashraf and Mahbubul Alam Hanif viewed it as a positive gesture towards ending the ongoing political crisis.

BNP chief Khaleda Zia hosted the iftar party yesterday in honour of politicians at LD Hall in the parliament.

Although Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad did not attend the programme, he sent a delegation led by his party Secretary General Ruhul Amin Hawlader.

Top leaders of different other political parties including Bikolpodhara and Krishak Sramik Janata League attended the iftar party.

A good number of top leaders from Islamist organisation Hefajat-e-Islam and other like-minded parties were also seen in the programme.

Meanwhile, different quarters had seen AL's decision to join Khaleda's iftar party as a positive sign in the political realm.

"Awami League last attended BNP's iftar party in 1991, while BNP continued to attend AL's parties until 1995. After that neither party took part in each others iftar programmes," Maruf Kamal Khan, press secretary of Khaleda told The Daily Star yesterday.

An AL presidium member yesterday said, "In the morning, the [communications] minister communicated with some AL leaders and said he was not willing to go to the iftar party."

The minister at a later programme in Gono Bhaban also informed the premier about his decision, said sources who attended the programme, adding that the PM then left the matter to the top leaders, saying: "You do whatever you think right."

Syed Ashraf then called off attending Khaleda's iftar party. Talking to reporters after the iftar programme, BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir termed AL's last moment decision unfortunate.

Asked what if AL did not come as leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami, the party that opposed the country's Liberation War and whose top leaders were being convicted for crimes against humanity, were also invited in the party, Fakhrul said, "This cannot be an excuse."

Hasina slates Hefajat

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told a function at Gono Bhaban.

The event was organised to inaugurate 88 air-conditioned buses bought under the \$1 billion Indian line of credit.

The prime minister said such remarks from an Islamic leader were unwarranted and obviously derogatory.

Her comments came after a speech of Shafi had been widely circulated in the social media recently, where the Hefajat ameer made some indecent remarks about women and likened them with mouth-watering tamarind (tentul).

Hasina said the first

person who had embraced Islam was a woman (Bibi Khadija); Bibi Ayesha had fought in the battlefield alongside Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and won a battle; and Bibi Sumayya was the first martyr in the history of Islam.

Besides, Bibi Khadija had engaged herself in trade and business, she added.

"I want to ask him [Allama Shafi], didn't he come from a mother's womb? Won't he respect the mother? Doesn't he have a sister or wife? Won't he uphold their dignity?" she questioned wondering about how a person could talk such "non-sense" about women.

Referring to the "tie-up" between the Hefajat and BNP, she said the Islamist organisation was now under the leadership of BNP, whose leader is a woman. "How could he [Shafi] accept her [Khaleda] as the leader?" questioned Hasina.

The PM requested the women leaders to raise their voice further so that no one in the future could use indecent words against any woman.

She also pointed out that Islam is the only religion which safeguards the rights of women properly. "Only we [as Muslims] can claim properties from both father's and husband's sides."

Saudi warns hajj pilgrims

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as children and pregnant women, are also listed, according to a ministry statement posted on its website.

The statement did not set an age limit, and it was not clear if the recommendation implies that no visas will be issued for such pilgrims.

The ministry said that the conditions were part of "preventive measures special to the MERS coronavirus".

It has asked others visiting the holy sites to wear masks in crowded places, BBC adds.

The kingdom is battling to contain the spread of the SARS-like coronavirus, which has infected 65 people in Saudi Arabia and led to 38 fatalities.

Those figures represent the majority of people affected worldwide -- 81 cases of infection and 45 deaths -- according to the World Health Organisation.

The Saudi decision comes after the WHO convened emergency talks on MERS last week, with concerns expressed about its potential impact on the hajj when millions of Muslims head to and from Saudi Arabia.

Experts are struggling to understand MERS, or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome.

The WHO has not recommended any MERS-related travel restrictions, but says countries should monitor unusual respiratory infection patterns.

The first recorded MERS death was in June last year in Saudi Arabia.

Like SARS, MERS appears to cause a lung infection, with patients suffering from fever, coughing and breathing difficulties.

But it differs in that it also causes rapid kidney failure.

The real life Terminator

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disasters, such as the Fukushima nuclear reactor meltdown in Japan in 2011, it looks like it could easily star in the Terminator films.

Its potential use in war seems more likely considering the team behind it also designed BigDog, the robotic dog due to be used by the Marines.

The robot's 28 hydraulic joints can replicate most human moves and its hands, provided by iRobot

and Sandia National Labs, can surpass them.

A light-based radar stereo camera in Atlas is the same detection system used by autonomous vehicles such as Google's self-driving car, according to ExtremeTech.

Although it is currently linked to an external power supply the robot has the ability to run off its own power, leaving it free to roam.

This ability will be useful when considering the robot's main purpose.

Atlas has been designed to be able to go into disaster zones where it would be unsafe to send people. It can handle rocky terrain and the flexibility of its hands will aid rescues.

However, its skills could just as easily be put to use on the battlefield, where they would be stronger and more accurate than a soldier.

The only thing the robot is currently missing is a brain, but more than a dozen teams of engineers are preparing to compete for the chance to provide it.

No quota now in preliminary test

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League. The organisation denies the allegation.

Students of Rajshahi University blocked the Dhaka-Rajshahi highway for 45 minutes from around 11:00am yesterday while Chittagong University students formed a human chain to demand the cancellation of quota system.

The demonstrators said they would continue their movement until realisation of their demand for the cancellation of quota provision in the public service recruitment.

They would enforce a student strike in colleges and universities across the country today, a press release said last night.

Currently, 56 percent of government jobs are reserved

for quotas, leaving only 44 percent for merit-based recruitment.

On Wednesday, the protest began with several hundred youths blocking the busy Shahbagh intersection in the capital for more than 11 hours demanding removal of the quota provision and cancellation of the preliminary results.

The demonstration turned violent the following day as protesters clashed with police for hours in the DU campus and adjoining areas.

Amra Muktioddhar Sontan, an organisation of freedom fighters' offspring, brought out a procession in the DU campus and vowed to stand against any conspiracy to abolish the quota provision.

The Sector Commanders Forum in a statement asked Public Service Commission to reform the quota system.

Meanwhile, the 14 youths, detained in connection with Thursday's violence, were produced before a Dhaka court yesterday. Police sought remand for them but were refused by the court.

Sirajul Islam, officer-in-charge of Shahbagh Police Station, said a donation receipt book of Islami Chhatra Shibir was found in the pocket of one of the detainees, Mohammad Imtiazul Hoque, 22.

Police released 31 out of 36 people who were picked up on Friday for suspected involvement in the violence, which left at least 30 people injured.

No respite from use of current nets

Fish species in water bodies threatened

MINTO DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

The wholesale use of current nets continues unabated in Moulvibazar's Hakaluki Haor during the ongoing breeding season, contributing to the extinction of local fish species living in the swamp.

Though there was a government restriction on netting fishes during the breeding period between April and July, the local fisheries officers said, the fishermen had indiscriminately been using the current nets defying the ban.

As a result, plenty of mother fish and fish fries are getting caught in the nets, resulting in the decline of fish production, and extinction of different fish species in the haor covering 181.15 square km area.

Hakaluki is a natural breeding ground for as many as 110 species of sweet water fish, local fisheries officials said, adding that 39 species had already become extinct.

On May 20, Juri upazila authorities served a notice asking the fishermen to hand over their nets to the upazila office.



PHOTO: STAR

Monofilament synthetic nylon nets, widely known as *current jal*, being burnt after they were seized at Hakaluki Haor. Even very young fishes cannot slip from this small-mesh net, which fishermen throughout the country use despite a ban.

The measure was taken to discourage the illegal netting of fishes in the ecologically critical area during the breeding season.

May 30 was set as deadline for surrendering the nets, but none heeded the notice, fisheries officials added.

After the end of the deadline, the fishery office at Juri upazila seized 37 nets from various places in the haor.

Fishery officials and

police also seized 400 kg of fish fries of different species from Bhuai Bazar in the same upazila.

In Baralekha upazila, a mobile court seized and burned about 1,500 metres of illegal cotton nets, Upazila Nirbahi Officer Syed Md Aminur Rahman told The Daily Star.

Locals said the illegal netting of fish fries is rampant in all upazilas of the district.

Fishermen, however,

said they had no alternative to catching fish. So, they were compelled to do it defying the ban.

Obaidul Hasan, fisheries extension officer of Kulaura upazila, said the government had initiated a project to provide the fishermen with ration during the next breeding season.

"We will start registering the real fishermen in September this year," he added.

Tk 601 cr financial anomalies found

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in approving loans. And in other cases, the branches acted on their own and even defied the headquarters' instructions.

A branch even approved two loans of Tk 100 crore one month and four days before it opened the accounts of the loan applicant.

In one instance, the bank's Gulshan branch lent more money to its client Opi Properties Ltd than the price of the mortgaged land and flats violating the bank's lending policy.

The branch extended the grace period for a year and the payment period for two years though the client's credit limit had already exceeded. It also approved term loans without adjusting short-term loans, and despite the fact that the client didn't pay instalments for term loans.

Besides, an additional loan of Tk 104.77 crore was created for the client through overvaluation of land and flats, said the report.

The branch, however, said the headquarters approved and extended the loan, and the money was disbursed following the headquarters' approval.

In another instance, the

Gulshan branch lent its client Khadija and Sons Tk 20 crore in 2011 on the basis of a false mortgage. It gave the money without conducting any inspection of the land quoted to be in Gazipur.

Later, the branch lent another Tk 5 crore to the same client.

The headquarters asked the branch not to give loans to the client, but the branch didn't pay heed to its instructions and disbursed the loans.

According to the report, the client showed as mortgage a plot of land in Gazipur, which is actually owned by another person, and thus created a mortgage-free loan of Tk 22.58 crore with the branch.

The report concluded that the branch did nothing to protect the bank's interests.

But the branch said the approval to the loans came from the headquarters.

The same branch also lent GTC Cargo International more money than the company's credit limit, which according to the report, amounted to showing favour to the client.

The bank's Jubilee Road branch extended credit limit for its client Abdus Salam and his five brothers,

despite the fact that their credit limits had already exceeded. The branch also extended the period for loan repayment though the clients did not repay instalments.

In one case, the repayment period was extended from five years to seven years though the client did not pay due instalments.

The bank faces a loss of Tk 16.14 crore in unrealised loan, as the Gulshan branch lent its client Tahmina Denim Ltd without inspecting the company and any information about the company's renovation and expansion plan.

The loan was given though the client had a suspect loan with the Gulshan branch of Dhaka Bank.

In this case, the branch lent more money to the client than the value of the mortgaged property.

The bank's headquarters also approved a loan without any mortgage.

The irregularities, however, did not stop there.

On August 31, 2009, the board of the bank rescheduled three loans of three companies owned by ABM Kamrul Islam showing deposits of Tk 28.07 lakh, Tk 6.99 lakh and Tk 32.03 lakh as down payments.

But the audit found that the down payments were made one month and four days after the board made the decision.

The irregularity took place, as the bank's Dhanmondi branch gave false information to the board that did not verify it.

Moreover, its Shantinagar branch opened accounts of the owner of Nipa Autorice Mills after the board approved two loans of Tk 100 crore in February last year breaching the bank's credit policy.

The audit found that the amount of default loans with the bank doubled in just one year to Tk 445.76 crore last year from Tk 217.18 crore in 2011.

Besides, the amount of classified loans trebled between 2010 and 2012.

In 2010, the amount of classified loans was Tk 223.99 crore, which rose to Tk 706.56 crore last year.

"Between 2011 and 2012, the rise in suspected classified loans is 763.58 percent and the rise in classified loans due to losses is 105.25 percent. This is worrying," said the report.

Despite repeated calls, Basic Bank Managing Director Faqurul Islam didn't pick up the phone.

Mass promotion in civil administration

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Sources in the bureaucracy say the fresh promotion move is apparently aimed at making bureaucrats happy ahead of next parliamentary polls.

Public Administration Secretary Abdus Sobhan Sikder has however termed it a routine job, saying many officials deserved the promotion.

The Superior Selection Board, headed by Cabinet Secretary Mohammad Mosharrar Hossain Bhuiyan, prepared the summary after scrutinising around 600 aspirants from three batches -- 84, 85 and 86 -- of Bangladesh Civil Service.

Many of the 400 deputy secretaries of 84 and 85 batches, who were earlier left out, are supposed to be

promoted this time. A number of officials of the 86th batch will also see their ranks elevated.

This is going to be the second round of promotion in the final year of the Awami League-led government. In the first phase, 182 senior assistant secretaries were promoted to the rank of deputy secretary on March 14 this year.

The sources say the civil administration would see another round of promotion in September-October in which a number of joint secretaries would be made additional secretaries. In case of the post of additional secretary 250 officials have outstripped the number of 108 approved posts.

Several additional secre-

aries may also become secretary before the government's tenure expires.

The rank of deputy secretary is also burdened with a plethora of officials. The approved posts for deputy secretary are 830, whereas 1,527 officials are holding the position.

The civil administration saw several promotion spree since the AL-led government assumed office in January 2009. The first came in September 2009 when 60 joint secretaries, 163 deputy secretaries and 271 senior assistant secretaries were promoted.

In another wholesale promotion on February 8, 2012, 649 officers were promoted to the ranks of additional secretary, joint

secretary and deputy secretary beyond the approved posts in the formal structure of the administration.

In giving promotion, officials inclined to the ruling party and with strong lobbying have been considered. In this process some ineligible officials got their position elevated, while some eligible ones were left out. This has caused rifts in the civil administration and frustration among the officials who deserved promotion.

Abdus Sobhan Sikder said the number of promotion aspirants is much bigger than the number of posts. "We are trying to give promotion gradually to all the eligible officers," he told The Daily Star.

RMG workers stage demo

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the highway. At least 38 workers were injured as police baton-charged them, lobbed teargas shells and fired rubber bullets to disperse the gathering.

The injured were given treatment at nearby clinics and hospitals. Road communication resumed around 1:00pm, said Shah Mohammad.

To avoid further violence, owners of 15 adjacent factories suspended production

for the day, he added.

In another incident, some 400 workers of Blue Seal Textile Mill at Sreepur of the district barricaded the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway for nearly two hours protesting sudden closure of the factory.

The workers claimed the authorities had closed the factory ahead of Eid to deprive them of festival bonus.

The protest that began

around 9:00am caused a four-kilometre tailback on the highway stretching from Maona intersection to Nayanpur.

On information, industrial police and Shreepur police rushed to the spot and quelled the protest, assuring the workers that the matter would be resolved.

Traffic movements resumed around 11:00am in the area.

In Tongi, some 200 work-

ers of Urobangla Sweater Factory demonstrated demanding an increase in the piece rate.

The situation became tense when the protest led to an altercation between the workers and owners. Industrial police rushed to the spot and took the situation under control.

Later, the issue was settled through a discussion in which the authorities agreed to increase the rate by Tk 5.