

Tarique acquitted

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Corruption Commission on June 7, 2007. So, the charges against him could not be brought under the Money Laundering Prevention Act-2002. Therefore, he is acquitted."

ACC Commissioner Mohammad Shahabuddin rejected the verdict, saying: "Tarique and Mamun had equal footing in the crime. So, legally there was no scope to differentiate."

The commission would appeal against the judgment, and so would Mamun's lawyers.

The verdict has taken the BNP by surprise. The main opposition party has all along been critical of the judiciary throughout the trial, but yesterday the defence lawyers hailed the judge, saying he had delivered the verdict with courage while working under a "subservient judicial system".

The ruling Awami League, however, did not officially react to the verdict.

It was the first judgment in one of the 16 cases, including the gruesome August 21 grenade attack cases, against Tarique, senior vice-chairman of BNP. He was arrested on March 7, 2007, during a crackdown on corruption by the military-backed caretaker government.

After securing a parole, he went to London in September 2008 for treatment, and later obtained bail in other cases as well.

He was tried in absentia as he did not appear before the court even after the court issued arrest orders for him twice. The court yesterday withdrew those orders.

Being a fugitive, the 48-year-old could not appoint a lawyer to defend him. Nor did he get one under state arrangement, as only those facing capital punishment get state counsel. The highest punishment in this case is seven year's jail term.

Mamun, who is in jail since March 26, 2007, was present in the court yesterday. He is also serving 20 year's jail term in three other cases.

Earlier on June 23, 2011, Tarique's younger brother Arafat Rahman Koko was sentenced to six years' rigorous imprisonment for laundering over Tk 20 crore to Singapore. Koko, a fugitive, faces

three more cases.

Their mother, Khaleda Zia, has five corruption cases against her.

As soon as the verdict was delivered in a packed courtroom, around 100 pro-BNP lawyers burst into cheers and chanted slogans in the courtroom.

Their jubilation soon spread all around the court premises where several hundred lawyers brought out a procession and chanted anti-government slogans. They showed "V" signs and distributed sweetmeats.

The prosecution expressed dissatisfaction over the acquittal of Tarique. Pro-government lawyers were angry, and they blamed prosecutors Mosharraf Hossain Kajol and Kabir Hossain for the outcome.

After the judge left the courtroom, pro-Awami League lawyers hurled abuse at the two, saying, "grab them, grab them". They also accused the prosecutors of taking bribe, a claim Kajol and Kabir outright rejected.

The pro-government lawyers also criticised the judge for the "unexpected verdict."

Some of them agitated outside the courtroom and at one stage started kicking the doors of the courtroom.

Anisul Huq, chief counsel for the ACC, told reporters: "I am definitely not satisfied with the verdict. But I accept the judgment of the court."

"I still think, on the basis of our evidence, there was no scope for the charges going unproven."

Security was tight and atmosphere tense in and around the court premises since early morning.

A prison van brought Mamun from Kashimpur Jail to the court in Old Dhaka around 10:00am. The court sat around 11:55am.

Delivering the verdict, the judge said Khadiza Islam, chairman of Nirman Constructions at Banani, was awarded the work of an 80-Megawatt power plant at Tongi in 2003.

When she did not get the work order even after 8-10 months, she contacted Mamun, who

assured her of securing for her the work order, but demanded money for the job.

Khadiza told Mamun that she would only pay after getting the work order. But Mamun forced her to deposit \$7,50,000 at Citibank N.A. in Singapore on August 1, 2003, the judge added.

During the trial, Khadiza told the court that she had given the money in consultancy fee, not in bribe.

Mamun, too, claimed that he received the money in consultancy fee, though he had no such firm, said the judge of the Special Judge's Court-3.

So he did not take the money with an honest intent and the government was in the dark about the amount, the court said, announcing Mamun guilty of siphoning off the money.

The judge noted that Tarique spent \$54,000 from Mamun's account, which Tarique mentioned in his wealth statement and cannot be therefore charged under the law.

But Mosharraf Hossain Kajol said it was not clear to the prosecution how the court acquitted Tarique and on what basis.

"Tarique as a fugitive had no lawyer to contest the case and he did not submit any such paper like his wealth statement to the court. But still the court showed such documents. How did he [the judge] get those documents?" he told The Daily Star.

Jahedul Islam Koyel, one of Mamun's counsels, claimed that Debra Laprevotte, a supervisory special agent of the FBI, submitted some papers, including Tarique's wealth statement, during her testimony in the case.

The ACC filed the case in October 2009 against the duo for laundering TK 20.41 crore to Singapore between 2003 and 2007. The charges were pressed in July 2010 and the trial began in September 2011.

In 2007, the Singapore government returned the money, which the court said should be spent on the development work of the country.

Taiwan in last-ditch bid to rescue Gambia ties

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan has sent senior diplomats to Gambia in a last-ditch effort to restore diplomatic relations after they were unilaterally broken off by the West African nation, officials said yesterday.

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Anna Kao said officials including Richard Shih, the island's ambassador to Gambia from 2008 through 2011, had arrived in Banjul.

She denied to provide details. Local media said that since the Taiwanese officials had not been denied entry and were in contact with their Gambian foreign ministry counterparts, Taiwan's foreign ministry believes that the Gambian government "has not shut the door to negotiations".

Gambian President Yahya Jammeh announced Thursday that "in strategic national interest" his government had broken off diplomatic ties with Taiwan after 18 years, catching Taipei totally unprepared.

While Taipei expressed "shock and regret", the surprise decision has prompted speculation about Jammeh's motive.

China, which has growing investments and influence in Africa, has denied it put pressure on Gambia, although it did say that

Turkey PM meets Iraqi Kurdish leader to shore up peace talks

AFP, Diyarbakir

Turkey's prime minister welcomed the leader of Iraq's autonomous north to his country's own Kurdish-dominated territory for the first time Saturday, in a visit designed to kickstart a stalled peace process.

Tens of thousands of Kurds turned out to watch Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan greet Iraqi Kurdish leader Massud Barzani in the Kurdish heartland of Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey.

Barzani has visited the capital of Ankara many times but Saturday's meeting was described by Erdogan as "historic" and a "crowning moment" in overcoming a three-decade conflict with the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Addressing the huge crowd, Erdogan said: "The peace process will progress with the support of my brothers in Diyarbakir."

"How have Turks and Kurds been able to tear each other apart? Turks and Kurds should no longer tear each other apart," he said in a half-hour speech, calling for an end to a conflict that has claimed some 45,000 lives.

Standing by his side was Barzani, whose influence among Turkey's Kurds Ankara hopes will bring them back to the negotiating table.

"I ask, on behalf of my Kurdish and Turkish brothers, that the peace process is supported," said Barzani.

Jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan called a landmark ceasefire in March but progress in the peace process has since stalled. His fighters suspended a promised withdrawal from Turkish soil in September, accusing Ankara of failing to fully deliver on promises to give the minority group greater rights.

The Turkish army reported on Friday that one of its convoys had for the first time in months been attacked, allegedly by PKK rebels in the southeastern Nusaybin district on the Syrian border.

Thousands of rebels remain holed up in the autonomous north of Iraq, using the

4-party polls-time

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opposed the government decision.

He was speaking at a press conference at the BNP chief's Gulshan office last night.

The BNP-led 18-party alliance would continue its ongoing movement to force the government to hold the election under a non-partisan government, said the BNP leader.

The developments come amid a flurry of diplomatic efforts to resolve the current political impasse over election-time government.

US Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Desai Biswal is in the capital on a three-day tour to bring the two rival camps to the negotiating table for a participatory national election expected to be held by January 24.

Following a meeting with Biswal in the afternoon, Hasina went to the Bangabhaban and gave the president the resignation letters the ministers and state ministers had submitted to her a week ago.

A couple of hours after the PM met the president, Biswal held talks with BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia on the ongoing crisis.

The ongoing crisis is likely to deepen further, as the BNP-led opposition has refused to join the interim cabinet. The opposition sticks to its demand for a non-party interim government and has vowed to resist any election under a Hasina-led government.

The PM has picked the new cabinet members from the ruling Awami League and its three allies -- the Jatiya Party, the Workers Party and the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, according to sources in the government and the ruling parties.

The cabinet will not take an "all-party" look, as the BNP and its allies -- the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Bangladesh Jatiya Party -- have decided to stay away from the polls-time government.

The new cabinet members include AL lawmakers Amir Hossain Amu and Tofail Ahmed, Workers Party lawmaker Rashed Khan Menon, and Jatiya party lawmakers Anisul Islam Mahmud, Ruhul Amin Hawlader, Rawshan Ershad, Ziauddin Bablu, Mujibul Haque Chunnu and Salma Islam, said the sources.

Incumbent ministers, including AMA Muhith, Matia Chowdhury, Syed Ashraful Islam, Abdul Latif Siddique, AK Khandker, Rajiuddin Ahmed Raju, Khandker Mosharraf Hossain, Abul Kalam Azad, Ramesh Chandra Sen, Obaidul Quader, Faruk Khan, Abdur Razzaque, Hasanul Haq Inu, Dipu Moni, Nurul Islam Nahid, Ghulam Muhammed Quader, Shajahan Khan, Hasan Mahmud and Mujibul Hoque would continue with their offices, as the PM didn't submit their resignation letters to the president, according to

the sources.

The Jatiya Party delayed the formation of the polls-time cabinet, as it declined to accept the AL's offer of three posts in the cabinet.

The JP kept pressing for more posts and the ruling party finally conceded to its demand, said sources in the AL.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Workers Party chief Menon said the cabinet secretary phoned him last night and requested him to prepare for taking oath.

JP Presidium member Ziauddin Bablu said, "Apart from me, five leaders of my party have received phone calls from the Cabinet Division for swearing in."

He mentioned the names of JP leaders Anisul Islam, Hawlader, Rawshan Ershad, Mujibul Haque and Salma Islam.

Political analysts say the government's latest decision will shut the door on negotiations for resolving the crisis and worsen the political situation further in the coming days.

"It will not contribute to solving the political crisis. It is a political decision that has been made in the interest of the ruling party," said Akbar Ali Khan, former adviser to a caretaker government.

Sultana Kamal, another ex-adviser to a caretaker government, expressed doubt about the interim government's success.

"The BNP will oppose this government. The party has rejected the formula of all-party government. I cannot be hopeful that this all-party government will be effective," she said.

The BNP-led alliance has refrained from enforcing hartal so far this week due to Biswal's visit, hoping for a progress in breaking the political stalemate.

Following the latest development, the BNP may enforce hartal from tomorrow and intensify its agitation once the Election Commission announces the election schedule, said BNP insiders.

BNP standing committee members Mahbubur Rahman and ASM Hannan Shah said the PM's latest move left the opposition with no option but to intensify street agitation.

The move would deepen the political crisis, and the opposition would enforce programmes like hartal and blockade to prevent the government from holding a one-sided election, they said.

EC officials will meet the president at the Bangabhaban tomorrow and inform him about the commission's preparations for holding the election by January 24.

The commission may announce the election schedule by the end of this month, said sources in the EC.

US wants credible

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would be held.

After the meeting, BNP Vice-Chairman Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury briefed newsmen on the meeting.

He said Khaleda told Biswal that her party BNP was looking for a solution through dialogue and that was what people wanted.

Mobin said during the meeting Biswal praised highly of Khaleda's speech delivered on October 21 at a press conference. Biswal termed the speech path-showing with a future outline to further strengthen democracy in Bangladesh, Mobin claimed.

Khaleda told Biswal that people did not want the next election to be held under a partisan government and that her party firmly believes a credible election was not possible under such administration.

She told the US official that people want election under non-party and neutral government, which was part of the constitution, and that the apex court had said the next two elections could be held under a non-party government.

On her arrival in Dhaka Saturday from Japan, Biswal had a series of meetings, including with Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus, the International Labour Organisation, Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity, and attended a reception organised by the US embassy in her honour.

At the meetings with Prof Yunus and readymade garment businessmen, she praised Bangladesh's economic advancement and expressed her government's wish for continuation of this trend.

Biswal's visit was against the backdrop of growing political violence with the ruling Awami League and the main opposition BNP putting their foot down on the polls-time government issue.

Diplomatic efforts, including UN chief's phone calls to Hasina and Khaleda and the US secretary of state's letters to the two leaders, were yet to yield any result.

Ticfa deal

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will leave for Washington on November 22 to ink the much-awaited trade deal, foreign ministry sources said yesterday.

Commerce Secretary Mahbub Ahmed will sign the agreement on behalf of Bangladesh while the US will be represented by Acting Deputy of US Trade Representative (USTR) Wendy Cutler.

Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque will also accompany the delegation.

The cabinet on June 17 approved Ticfa after more than a decade of talks, but the agreement was not signed due to confusion within the government.

Meantime, the suspension of trade privileges known as generalised system of preferences (GSP) for Bangladesh in the US market on June 27 prompted the government to delay the signing of the deal further.

According to government officials, Ticfa says the two countries will foster an open and predictable environment for trade and investment.

The deal will force Bangladesh to take a clear stance against corruption and promote fundamental labour rights laid out in the ILO declaration of 1998 and effectively enforce the local labour law.

The deal will also push Bangladesh towards enforcing intellectual property rights in line with the WTO rules.

Bangladesh will also open its service sector to US investors. The two countries will form a forum to discuss these issues and barriers to trade and investment and it will sit at least once a year.

AFP, Paris

A French engineer taken hostage in Nigeria in December 2012, Francis Collomp, has been freed, President Francois Hollande said yesterday.

In a statement, Hollande expressed thanks to Nigerian authorities for helping to secure the release of 63-year-old Collomp, but provided no other details of how he was freed.

"The president greets with joy the release of our compatriot Francis Collomp," Hollande said.

"France had never ceased to make every effort to achieve this happy outcome. The president expresses all of his gratitude to Nigerian authorities, with whom France worked in close cooperation, for their decisive action," Hollande said.

Ershad seeks

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policies.

Ershad assured the Hefajat chief that his party would reinstate the words "full faith in Almighty Allah" in the country's constitution, JP leader Anisul Islam Mahmud, who accompanied the party chairman, told The Daily Star.

Talking to reporters later, Ershad said he would participate in the election after forming a "new alliance."

"I have come here not to discuss political matters, but to seek his blessings so that I could succeed in the next polls," he added.

Hefajat Secretary General Junaid Babunagari told reporters, "Ershad assured us that he would try to meet the 13-point demand if he could go to power."

He also said Hefajat would not participate in the election under its banner nor would it form any alliance with any political party.

support for "the peaceful reunification of China is an irreversible trend".

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei said his country had learnt of Gambia's move from the foreign media.

"Before that, we haven't had contact with the Gambian side," he said.

Some scholars and politicians said Jammeh might use the drastic step, which reduces the number of countries recognising Taiwan to 22, to demand more aid from Taiwan as a condition for a change of heart.

"Should it demand a lot, the rest of the allies might follow in its footsteps, then how could the government deal with them?" said legislator Lin Yu-fang of the ruling Kuomintang party.

Taiwan and China were separated 1949 after a civil war, but Beijing still claims the self-ruled island as part of its territory awaiting reunification, by force if necessary.

The two sides for years engaged in a bitter diplomatic tug-of-war, luring away each other's allies with generous financial packages.

But tensions eased markedly when Ma Ying-jeou of the China-friendly Kuomintang party was elected president in 2008. He was re-elected in January 2012.

region -- which is under Barzani's control -- as a springboard for attacks on Turkish targets.

But Barzani told AFP that Kurds should use non-violent means to gain the homeland they believe they deserve.

"Having our own state is the natural right of the Kurdish people, but that cannot be achieved through violence," he said.

Reforms not enough

Turkey's "Kurdish question" has been a thorn in Ankara's side since the modern republic was founded in 1923 with a constitution that failed to recognise its Kurdish population as a separate minority.

The Kurds, a distinct Sunni Muslim people, make up an estimated 20 per cent of Turkey's population or around 15 million people, but are also scattered across Iraq, Iran and Syria.

Certain prominent Kurds have criticised Barzani's visit as an opportunistic gesture ahead of Turkey's municipal elections in March 2014.

"Barzani's participation in the kick-off of the prime minister's campaign is highly suggestive," said the leader of the pro Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party in Diyarbakir, Mehmet Emin Yilmaz.

But others were more optimistic, with respected Kurdish lawmaker Leyla Zana saying the talks with Barzani were motivated by "hope".

Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) passed a package of reforms in September designed to give Kurds and other groups extra rights, but these failed to grant Kurds any constitutional recognition.

Syria's civil war, which has seen Kurdish forces make significant territorial gains against jihadists, will also feature heavily in the talks between Erdogan and Barzani.

Barzani's visit comes just days after the powerful Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) declared a new transitional authority in Syrian Kurdistan.

French engineer kidnapped in Nigeria in 2012 freed: Hollande

"This long-awaited news does not make us forget our seven compatriots who are still being held in Syria, in Mali and in Nigeria. France will continue to work tirelessly for their release."

The statement said Hollande had asked Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius to make his way immediately to Nigeria to receive Collomp.

Collomp was kidnapped by around 30 armed men who attacked the residence of French firm Vergnet, the company for which he is working, in the state of Katsina in northern Nigeria on the border with Niger.

The kidnapping was claimed by Nigerian radical Islamist group Ansaru, which has links to extremist group Boko Haram.

"If any government enacts any law against the spirit of Quran-Sunnah, Hefajat-e Islam along with the people would compel it to repeal that law," he added.

Queried, Anisul, also a lawmaker from Hathazari constituency, said Ershad did not give any assurance of implementing Hefajat's 13-point demand.

At a rally in the capital's Motijheel area on April 6, Hefajat announced the 13 demands including ban on free mixing of men and women, candlelit vigil and intrusion of exotic culture.

The demands have drawn flak from different sections of the society, as they are deemed contradictory to the spirit of Liberation War.

Women's rights activists have denounced those, saying Bangladesh would be pushed backwards if the demands were met.

Yunus conveyed

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already shared with the media. I don't want to repeat what I've said."

The Nobel laureate had criticised the Awami League-led government earlier this month, urging people to vote for political parties that would restore the Grameen Bank to its original shape.

A range of issues, including Grameen Bank, social business, socio-economic development and his upcoming visit to Myanmar, had been discussed at the hour-long meeting at the residence of US Ambassador Dan Mozena, said Yunus.

Biswal, who he said was fond of the micro-credit organisation, wanted to know about its current state. "I expressed my concern about the bank. I also gave her a summary of my recent statements, which had been reported in newspapers," he added.

She mentioned that Bangladesh has made significant progress in the socio-economic sector and emphasised combined efforts so that such progress is not hindered.

"The US does not want to see Bangladesh's progress hampered. It wants Bangladesh not only to keep up its achievement but also to proceed further," Biswal was quoted as saying.

About his upcoming visit, Yunus said, "I will visit Myanmar in April and I want to discuss Rohingya issues there. I spoke to