

Elian Gonzalez blames US law for childhood ordeal

AFP, Havana

Elian Gonzalez, who at age six sparked an international custody battle that ended in his dramatic return to Cuba, blamed a US law for his mother's death in an interview posted yesterday.

In November 1999, Gonzalez was plucked from the sea off Florida's coast after an overcrowded motorboat capsized en route from Cuba, killing his mother and 10 others seeking to enter the United States illegally.

His Florida relatives fought to keep him in the United States, but his father demanded he be returned.

The event culminated on June 30, 2000, when heavily-armed US agents broke into the Miami home of Gonzalez's uncle, 2000, on orders of then-US attorney-general Janet Reno to return the boy to Cuba.

"They were very sad moments for me, which marked me for life," Gonzalez said yesterday in an interview with the local weekly Giron and published on the cubadebate.cu website.

"It never gave me the chance to think of my mother, who died in the sea as a result of the Cuban Adjustment Act" he said, referring to a

1966 US law that says any Cuban who reaches the United States by any means will be allowed to stay and work.

Havana has called the law "murderous" and blamed it for encouraging people to board rickety boats to cross the Florida straits in the hopes of reaching the US coast -- a process that has left thousands dead.

Reflecting on the events after he reached Miami, Gonzalez, who turns 20 in December, said he "suffered the consequences of the Act."

He said his basic rights as a child -- "the right to be with my father, the right to maintain my nationality and remain in my cultural context" -- were also violated until he was finally returned to his father by court order.

But he emphasized "our struggle is not against the American people, it is against their government."

"From the moment Americans knew of my case, they took to the streets to call for me to be sent back to my country," he said.

Elian's return to Cuba was a huge boon to then-leader Fidel Castro, as illegal emigration is an embarrassing everyday reality in the only one-party communist state in the Americas.

HC alters lower court verdict

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On December 30 last year, a lower court awarded death penalty to the five in the case.

Yesterday, the HC bench of Justice Moyeenul Islam Chowdhury and Justice Kazi Md Ejarul Haque Akondo came up with the verdict after hearing the death reference and the appeals filed by Al Amin, Khokon, Lalu and Mamun against their convictions handed down by the lower court.

After examining the statements of the witnesses before the trial court, and the documents and pieces of evidence of the case, the HC said it found that Saiful Islam Mamun had shot from a revolver to kill Khalaf, and therefore, it convicted and sentenced him to death.

The HC bench commuted the death sentence of Mohammad Al Amin, Rafiqul Islam Khokon and Akbar Ali Lalu to life term imprisonment as it found that they had participated in the crime but had not shot Khalaf.

Selim Chowdhury was acquitted as the court found no evidence of his involvement in the crime.

Deputy Attorney General Khurshidul Alam

told The Daily Star that the government would move an appeal before the Supreme Court seeking death penalty of Al Amin, Khokon, Lalu and Selim.

Meanwhile, defence lawyer Khabir Uddin Bhuiyan said his clients too would appeal to the apex court against their convictions.

He also said though the names of his clients were not mentioned in the first information report, they were shown arrested in the case later.

More than four months after the murder of Khalaf, the Detective Branch of police made a breakthrough in the case in July last year when they recovered the revolver used in the killing from the house of Mamun in Bhasantek of the capital.

The police arrested the four convicts the same month and showed them arrested in the murder case.

In their confessional statements before a magistrate, Al Amin and Lalu said they had killed the Saudi embassy official after failing to realise money from Khalaf. They also named Selim as the fifth person involved in the killing.

BNF gets EC registration

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with BNP's electoral symbol sheaf of rice.

BNP had urged the EC several times not to register BNF as the party used the photograph of BNP founder and late president Ziaur Rahman, and chose sheaf of wheat as its electoral symbol.

After the initial selection, the EC started a field-level investigation to see whether the BNF could meet the registration conditions.

According to the political party registration act, a party must have offices in 21 districts, 100 upazilas or thanas with at least 200 supporters in each of them to get registered.

But EC officials found that the party failed to meet the requirements and over the last few months, the commission gave BNF additional time twice, violating the act for fulfilling the conditions to be registered as a political party with the EC.

Finally, BNF was able to meet the conditions last month.

EC Secretary Muhammed Sadique yesterday handed over the registration certificate to the party's Chief Coordinator Abul Kalam Azad at the EC Secretariat.

Talking to The Daily Star, Azad said BNF has

plans to contest from all 300 constituencies in the upcoming election.

EC MEETING WITH PRESIDENT

A delegation of the EC, led by Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad, will meet President Abdul Hamid today to inform him about the EC's preparation for holding the next general election.

The meeting is scheduled for 4:00pm at Bangabhaban, said EC officials.

Apart from the EC's polls preparation, election commissioners may discuss tentative dates for holding the election, EC officials added.

The commissioners may also request the president to find a way to ensure participation of all political parties in the election.

Earlier, CEC Rakibuddin Ahmad and EC Commissioner Shah Nawaz said they would request the president to take necessary steps for deployment of the army during the polls.

According to tradition, the EC delegates meet the president before announcing the schedule for national elections.

The 10th parliamentary election is supposed to be held between October 27 this year and January 25 next year.

Hasina leans on JP

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cabinet, government sources said.

The polls-time cabinet will be "moderately big" and may have around 30 members, the sources said, adding that almost all the senior ministers would retain their posts.

A gazette notification will be issued today regarding the re-distribution of portfolios. The gazette will also clarify who would not be in the election-time government, Cabinet Secretary Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan told reporters yesterday.

This latest move is almost certain to face strong resistance from the BNP-led 18-party alliance. The opposition has all along maintained that it would not take part in the election if it is not held under a non-party caretaker government.

Of late, the BNP has even threatened to resist any polls under Hasina administration.

To frustrate the opposition plan, the government and AL policymakers have long been trying to forge an "alternative" opposition alliance led by HM Ershad, the deposed military ruler.

After a meeting between Hasina and Ershad on October 21 at the Gono Bhaban, AL General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam told journalists that the JP would compete against the AL if the BNP boycotted the polls.

But the grand alliance would remain intact if the BNP took part in the election, he added.

As part of the strategy, Ershad yesterday quit the AL-led grand alliance and announced to participate in the election. And he has already moved to form an alliance with some Islamic and other small parties.

Ershad's meeting on Sunday with Hefajat-e-Islam chief Ahmed Shafi was aimed at obtaining support of the Qwami madrasa-based organisation that Shafi heads.

"Since we have decided to participate in the polls, we are joining the polls-time govern-

ment," Ershad said when asked why his party joined the cabinet despite quitting the grand alliance.

Political analysts say if the BNP boycotts the upcoming polls, JP's participation in it would lend some kind of legitimacy to the election, which the government so desperately wants. But all these government efforts will go in vain if the JP refuses to go to the polls at the eleventh hour.

On February 15, 1996, the BNP-led government held a one-sided election that the AL, JP, Jamaat and other parties boycotted. The election lacked credibility and the House lasted just two weeks.

Towards the end of the last BNP-led four-party rule, the BNP tried hard to bring JP in its alliance. To secure a deal, Ershad was acquitted in a number of cases pending against him. But Ershad did not finally join the BNP-led alliance as his demands were not fully met.

This time, Ershad bargained with the government for more seats in the election-time government. The government offered the JP three posts, but Ershad kept pressing for more and the ruling party eventually gave in to his demand, said sources in the AL.

The five JP MPs inducted in the cabinet are Ruhul Amin Hawlader, Rawshan Ershad, Anisul Islam Mahmud, Mujibul Haque Chunnul and Salma Islam. Of them, the first three took oath as ministers and the last two as state ministers.

JP Presidium Member Ziauddin Bablu was appointed the PM's adviser with a minister's status. Including him, Hasina now has eight advisers.

Two senior AL leaders -- Amir Hossain Amu and Tofail Ahmed -- and Rashed Khan Menon of Workers Party also took oath as ministers.

Tofail and Menon had earlier declined to join the cabinet.

NASA counts down to launch of Mars orbiter

AFP, Cape Canaveral

NASA yesterday began the countdown to the launch of a new Mars spacecraft on a mission to study how the air on the Red Planet has changed over time.

Researchers have described the mission as a search for a missing piece to the puzzle of what happened to Mars' atmosphere, perhaps billions of years ago, to transform Earth's neighbor from a water-bearing planet that might have been favorable for life to a dry, barren desert.

The launch of the unmanned Mars Atmosphere and Volatile Evolution (MAVEN), could happen as early as 1:28 pm (1828 GMT) from Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Despite some concerns about thick clouds, the weather forecast was 60 percent favorable for takeoff during a two-hour launch window, US Air Force officials said Monday.

After a 10-month journey to Mars, the orbiter will take measurements at various altitudes to help scientists learn about the atmosphere, which has never been studied before.

"MAVEN is the first spacecraft devoted to exploring and understanding the Martian upper atmosphere," the US space agency said.

Khaleda to urge

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Fakhrul, however, evaded a direct reply when asked if any leader from Jamaat-e-Islami, a component of the alliance, will be included in the delegation. The team will be comprised of 18-party components, he said.

The president's office fixed 6:30pm today for the meeting after Khaleda sent a letter to Hamid yesterday morning, seeking an appointment, said Bangabhaban sources.

Several BNP policymakers told The Daily Star yesterday that Khaleda will request the president to take steps to resolve the crisis over election-time government through talks.

The BNP chief is also likely to inform the president about the proposal she made last month on the formation of a non-party polls-time government.

About the polls-time cabinet formed yesterday, Khaleda will express the opposition's concern that it would worsen the political crisis, BNP standing committee member Lt Gen (retd) Mahbubur Rahman said.

The alliance last night rejected the "all-party polls-time government", saying it is nothing but a reshuffled ruling alliance cabinet.

The opposition will hold rallies across the country including the capital on Friday, protesting "reshuffle of the cabinet" and demanding restoration of the caretaker government system and release of its arrested leaders.

The BNP acting secretary general announced the programme emerging from a meeting of senior BNP leaders with party chief Khaleda Zia in the chair at her Gulshan office.

"The reshuffle of the cabinet cannot be considered as all-party polls-time government or an interim government in any way because eight political parties have representation in parliament but in the reshuffled cabinet, only four of them have representation," Fakhrul said.

The election cannot be free and fair under such a government, and so the opposition will not participate in it, he added.

Fakhrul also said this is a grand alliance cabinet formed to hold a one-sided and stage-managed election.

The opposition will continue its "peaceful movement" to realise its demand for holding the next election under a non-party administration, he said.

Earlier in the day, BNP Joint Secretary General Rizvi Ahmed and Opposition Chief Whip Zainul Abidin Faroque, speaking at two different programmes, said the "all-party government" is nothing but a Baksal administration comprising components of the Awami League-led grand alliance.

Rizvi lambasted Jatiya Party chief HM Ershad for joining the "all-party polls-time government."

He said, "Ershad is a dishonest man, who plays double standard and lacks morality as well as patriotism. He makes contradictory remarks. We don't have any reaction concerning a person who says in the morning people would spite him if he joins unilateral polls and in the evening joins the so-called all-party government."

Rizvi made the remarks at a press briefing at BNP's Nayapaltan central office.

Rokia re-elected

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Chair of Arlinks Ltd, Rokia has investments in RR Cold Storage Ltd, Aris Holdings Ltd, Imaan Cold Storage Ltd, Mediaworld Ltd, MIDAS Financing Ltd, Mediastar Ltd and Reliance Insurance Ltd.

Rokia, former adviser to a caretaker government, is also involved with Bangladesh Federation of Women Entrepreneurs, Brac, Manusher Jonno Foundation, Bangladesh Freedom Foundation and Grameenphone.

The committee also elected Anis A Khan the chamber's new vice-president, according to the statement.

Khan is the managing director of Mutual Trust Bank (MTB). He was the managing director of IDIC Finance Ltd before joining the MTB. He also served Grindlays Bank, ANZ Grindlays Bank and Standard Chartered Bank.

He is a fellow member of the Institute of Bankers, Bangladesh, vice-chairman of Primary Dealers Bangladesh and director of Bangladesh Foreign Exchange Dealers Association.

He also sits on the board of governors of Association of Bankers and Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management.

Yusuf was involved

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fied on November 10 that Razakars had killed these freedom fighters as well as Salam on the orders of Yusuf.

Terming Yusuf the founder of the infamous Razakar force, Khaleque, the eighth prosecution witness in the case, said the force had killed 93 people in Sharankhola and around a lakh in Khulna division.

During his 66-minute testimony, Khaleque said he was an SSC examinee in 1971, but soon dropped his studies to join the war.

On April 25, 1971, Yusuf addressed a rally in the Rayenda Bazar Pilot High School ground, attended by Jamaat and Muslim League men. He described the Hindus as the "enemies of Pakistan" and ordered looting and torching of their homes, Khaleque said.

Yusuf had also labelled Awami League men and pro-liberation people as such, said Khaleque. Yusuf had delivered similar speeches at Rampal and Kachua in the district on April 19 and 22, which instigated attacks on a number of Hindu houses in the areas.

With 96 trained men of Jamaat and Muslim League, Yusuf formed the Razakar force in Khulna on May 5 of 1971. He sent Razakars to different parts of the district, after supplying them with arms, ammunition and clothes.

On June 6 that year, Khaleque and his co-fighters, including Captain Anwar Hossain, Asmat Ali and Ismail Hossain, took position at Rayenda Bazar to fight the Razakars. But local Razakars informed Yusuf about the impending ambush beforehand, Khaleque narrated.

In the early hours of the next day, local Razakars and those who came with Yusuf

started firing on freedom fighters, which caused them to retreat after a two-hour battle, said Khaleque, adding that he had hidden behind RKDS Girls' School.

Around 10:00am, Razakars found out Captain Anwar, Asmat and Ismail and bayoneted them in front of Yusuf. They were shot dead in a nearby village later on, said Khaleque.

On June 9, 1971, some freedom fighters, including Zainul Fakir and Hanif Molla, went to Taffalbari market because there was no food in their camp. Basarat Kha, who supplied information to freedom fighters, also went to the market with Zainul and Hanif.

In a sudden raid, about three dozen Razakars led by Yusuf besieged the market and caught Zainul and Basarat. Razakars tortured them while Yusuf himself kicked them and hit them with the rifle butt. The two were later shot dead.

Khaleque said freedom fighters who had gone to Taffalbari with Zainul informed him about the killings, following which he met the families of the deceased.

Khaleque identified Yusuf, who was in the dock yesterday, towards the end of his testimony.

Yusuf is facing 13 charges of crimes against humanity and genocide committed in greater Khulna district during the war.

Khaleque was cross-examined by Yusuf's lawyer Saifur Rahman. The three-member tribunal, led by Justice Obaidul Hassan, adjourned the case proceedings until tomorrow, when Khaleque faces further cross-examination.

It will not end

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would break the current political impasse.

The main opposition BNP has rejected the cabinet and remains firm on its position that it will not participate in the national election if not overseen by a non-party caretaker government.

Prof Syed Manzoorul Islam, a noted litterateur, said this polls-time government could not be called an all-party government since the main opposition BNP had not joined it.

"Both the parties will have to make sacrifices and talks should be held to negotiate a compromise," said Manzoorul Islam, a teacher of Dhaka University English department.

Former cabinet secretary Ali Imam Majumder said there would be no political stability without the participation of the main opposition party in the polls.

The purpose of the newly-formed cabinet is to oversee the election, but it will not be able to ensure a credible and peaceful election without any cooperation of the BNP, he said.

Shantanu Majumder, a teacher of DU politi-

cal science, said the formation of the election-time cabinet would not worsen the political situation.

"People want an immediate end to the countrywide violence that left many dead and properties damaged. And we can see a positive sign to that end."

"We have seen the opposition chief seek an appointment from the president. We may see some positive developments in the coming days."

Shantanu, however, said it was regrettable the Awami League, being a democratic party, had compromised with a former military dictator.

Nizam Ahmed, professor of the public administration department at Chittagong University, said the formation of the cabinet would not solve the crisis as the BNP had boycotted it.

"It is not an all-party cabinet, rather it is a strategy of the Awami League to make the grand alliance more organised," he said.

He stressed the need for forming a non-partisan polls-time government through talks to end the deadlock.

Go for talks, immediately

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major political parties to engage immediately in earnest dialogue to chart a course of action that will resolve in election that the people of Bangladesh can find credible," she added.

The US assistant secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs also said her country's relationship with Bangladesh was incredibly important and that's why she made it such priority to get here even before her ceremonial swearing in.

"So I just want to convey again the priority the US places and that I personally place on this relationship."

Referring to her meetings with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Khaleda Zia, she said, "We underscored our call for a dialogue. We are hopeful that such a dialogue can and will take place."

Asked what impression she got after talking with the two leaders, she said, "We are pushing for a dialogue that allows the major political parties to come together around a process. That's where I want us to focus our efforts and our attention."

Biswal went on, "I am an optimistic person by nature. I have reason to have hope. We do believe there's a way forward. We believe that dialogue needs to be happened."

Expressing her preference for secretary-level dialogue, she said sometimes it brings results as technical issues are involved. "We think that the party lieutenants -- the party secretary generals -- can and should meet."

The key US official, however, said what is most important right now is dialogue -- whether it's between the two top leaders, or whether it's at the secretary general level.

On the election-time government, Biswal said it is for the major political parties to determine how an election-time government should look like but it requires dialogue too.

She said all the political parties should come together for establishing a level-playing field to build people's confidence.

Asked whether the election will be acceptable to international community if BNP does not participate, Biswal put a counter question: "Is it going to be acceptable to the Bangladeshi people?"

She added, "It's not for me to determine. That's the point I am trying to make."

"The international community will be making a determination based on the assessment of the Bangladeshi people. That's the bottom line."

On Ambassador Mozena's visit to India to discuss Bangladesh's political turbulence, she said, "Let me just reiterate that the position of the United States has been very clear which is that we are not invested in any particular outcome but we strongly support the democratic process that leads to peaceful, free, fair and credible election."

Responding to question on reported difference with India, she said, "The position of the US is very clear. Our position is very consistent with the position of international community. I'll leave it to others to clear their position. But I'm not aware of any difference."

Asked about Indian High Commissioner Pankaj Saran's comment that New Delhi dis-

cussed Bangladesh issues with Washington, Biswal said: "We are in conversation and consultation with all of our colleagues in the international community, including the Indians."

"We certainly discussed with them a range of bilateral issues but we also discussed with them our desire, our support and our conviction on democratic process and our interest in supporting that democratic process."

Asked where she will go from Dhaka, she said, "I am actually going back to Washington. Because you know I had this trip before I actually had my ceremony of swearing in ... I am not yet fully ceremonially in my job. So I need to go back to Washington."

The US official also said all parties in Bangladesh should have a right for political space to freely and peacefully express their views.

She added, "Violence of any kind, by any of the participants in the political process can't be tolerated ... it's not part of democratic process."

Biswal highly appreciated Bangladesh's progress in various areas, including women empowerment and vibrant civil society.

She also expressed her satisfaction over her meetings with a broad spectrum of people including civil society representatives, businessmen, labour leaders and politicians. "It's a tremendous opportunity to hear from Bangladeshi people."

Biswal said she had an opportunity to discuss the challenges the emerging democracy of Bangladesh is now confronting with the election getting nearer.

Biswal arrived here on Saturday on her first visit to Bangladesh and left Dhaka for Washington last night.

US Ambassador in Dhaka Dan Mozena and Spokesperson Kelly McCarthy were present at the press conference at American Recreation Club.

Pope to call for Philippines aid in 'Year of Faith' event

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis will appeal for donations for the typhoon-wracked Philippines as he winds up the Vatican's "Year of Faith" in a Saint Peter's Square ceremony on Sunday, the Vatican said.

"The pope will ask everyone from cardinals to the simple faithful" to donate aid money for the Philippines, Archbishop Rino Fisichella told a news conference yesterday.

The weekend ceremony, expected to attract tens of thousands of people, will feature the first-ever public display of remains believed to be those of Saint Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ who is considered to be the first pope and founder of the Catholic Church.

The bones were discovered in a 1940 archaeological dig next to an ancient monument honouring Saint Peter. In 1968, Pope Paul VI said scientific tests concluded with "high probability" that the bones were those of Peter.