

Turkey PM vows action against 'fake' recordings

AFP, Ankara

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday condemned leaked recordings of him and his son allegedly discussing how to hide large sums of money as a "vile attack" by rivals, as calls mounted for his beleaguered government to resign.

"What was done is a vile... and a treacherous attack against the prime minister of the Republic of Turkey. It will not go unpunished," Erdogan told his ruling party lawmakers in parliament.

The phone conversations, posted on YouTube, allegedly reveal Erdogan asking his son Bilal to turn millions of euros in cash stashed at several houses into "zero".

Bilal at one point can be heard saying: "There is 30 million (\$41 million) euros more."

The leaked discussions, which could not be independently verified, were said to have taken place on December 17, the same day key Erdogan allies were caught up in police raids linked to a corruption investigation that has rocked the government.

In one conversation, Erdogan can supposedly be heard briefing Bilal about the raids, which saw top businessmen and the sons of former cabinet ministers detained on allegations of bribery, gold smuggling and illicit dealings with sanctions-hit Iran.

The premier's office said the wiretapped conversations were fabricated and vowed to take legal action against those behind "this dirty setup".

"The recordings... are the product of an immoral montage and completely untrue," Erdogan's office said in a statement late on Monday after the material was leaked online.

Erdogan has come under intense pressure since the corruption scandal erupted, throwing up the biggest challenge yet to his 11 years in power ahead of key local elections in March.

He has blamed his ally-turned-rival, US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, for instigating the graft probe, accusing him of seeking to create "a parallel state" in Turkey.

The leaked recordings appear to be the latest fallout from their feud,

after the Turkish government on Monday said thousands of influential people, including the premier, cabinet ministers and journalists, had been wiretapped by Gulen supporters in the police and the judiciary.

Local media said the widespread surveillance was discovered by prosecutors who were appointed following a mass purge of the police and prosecution service in response to the corruption probe.

Erdogan, whose speech in parliament was repeatedly interrupted by party loyalists chanting "Turkey is proud of you!", said his government would not fall into traps set by rivals.

"We are not scared of anyone, any country... We are not scared of any traitor," he said.

But the controversy prompted fresh calls from the opposition for the government's resignation.

"The government has lost its legitimacy... and must resign immediately," Haluk Koc, a spokesman for the main opposition Republican People's Party, told a news conference late Monday.

Not united even after such tragedy

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Intriguingly, most of her party's policymakers yesterday told The Daily Star they were not aware of any such information on the mutiny, in which 74 people including 57 army officers were killed.

"I don't believe any Bangladeshis are involved in this killing. The killers were hired from outside who entered the BDR headquarters in official uniform," Khaleda said at a mourning procession in 2009 to pay respect to the victims.

Asked if the party had any information regarding Khaleda's claim, BNP spokesperson Fakhru Islam

Alamgir yesterday told The Daily Star he needed to check if his party or the party chief had any evidence to that end.

Contacted by The Daily Star on Sunday, six standing committee members of BNP said they did not know anything about the party chief's claim that "foreign spies" or the government's men were involved.

All of them said the issue was discussed briefly at a meeting of the party's highest policymaking body after the mutiny, but who were responsible did not come to their discussion.

"To my knowledge, she [Khaleda] had never discussed who were involved in the BDR carnage," a BNP standing committee member said, adding that everyone should show restraint in making comments on this sensitive issue.

BNP senior leader Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain said, "Our stance on BDR mutiny remains the same. We demanded that the government make public the probe report on BDR mutiny. But the administration partially revealed the report. That's why we are not convinced if the government identified and punished the real culprits."

AL to go tough on upazila rebels

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dissidents, the party could not achieve the expected results in the first phase of upazila elections. If the party could ensure lone candidacy, the polls result would be better, they said.

At the first phase of upazila polls, AL-backed candidates won 34 chairman posts and BNP-supported candidates 41.

After the party's unexpected result in the first phase of the polls, the AL has employed all possible means to influence the dissidents to quit the race.

But its efforts might not yield any result as the party has at least 57

rebel candidates for the chairman posts in 42 upazilas out of 117 upazilas.

The second phase of the upazila elections is scheduled to be held tomorrow.

Meanwhile, Hasina at a cabinet meeting on Monday asked Obaidul Quader to act as a coordinator in dealing with the party rebels. She also said the rebels must be managed in order to avoid further debacle in the local elections.

The party, for the first time, expelled its seven leaders for contesting the upazila elections and supporting party rebels.

They are Eskander Mirza Bacchu, organizing secretary of Badolgai thana unit of AL under Naogaon, and its treasurer Shamsul Alam Khan, Mymensingh sadar upazila AL leaders Afaz Sarker, Faizur Rahman Fakir, Manikganj sadar upazila president Jalal Uddin Ahmed, women affairs secretary Saleha Islam, Soaimuri upazila under Noakhali district AL leader Ruhul Amin.

A press release of the party, signed its office secretary Adus Sobhan Golap, said they were expelled for violating the party discipline.

BNP wants retrial

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perpetrators wanted to break the strength of the army.

At a press briefing at the party's Nayapaltan central office yesterday, he said the trial process had raised questions among people as a number of people, whose name came up in the statements of witnesses and in media reports at that time, were not tried.

He also said though former BNP lawmaker Nasir Nasiruddin Ahmed Pintu was not involved in the carnage, he was punished in the case.

Fakhru criticised the government for decorating the capital with lightings to mark the opening of the

Asia Cup Cricket yesterday on the fifth anniversary of the carnage at the Pilkhana headquarters of Bangladesh Rifles (now Border Guard Bangladesh) that killed 74 people, including 57 army officers.

"The government has decorated the city in disrespect to the incident," he said.

The BNP leader also claimed that police had not allowed the BNP to hold a memorial discussion at the Institution of Diploma Engineers yesterday with the members of the slain army officials' families.

"We applied for the permission on February 17 and till last night they [police] assured us of the

permission but the auditorium authorities told us this morning that the police had not given the permission," Fakhru said at a press briefing at the party's Nayapaltan central office yesterday.

When contacted, the media centre of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police said they were not informed of this.

Meanwhile, BNP Standing Committee Member Lt Gen (ret.) Mahbubur Rahman said a deep-rooted conspiracy lied behind the BDR massacre.

While placing wreaths at the graveyard of the army officers killed in the carnage yesterday, he said the "real masterminds" of the carnage

Gap goes with upazila polls

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an agreement and both parties are contesting for chairman posts. This is because, in those upazilas Jamaat feels confident of winning.

The grassroots of BNP and Jamaat are negotiating in some other upazilas that will go to polls in the third phase on March 15.

Asked about the development, BNP Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said since it was a local government election, there was no rush from high command on forging consensus with other party.

"The local leaders are doing whatever they think is the best," he said. Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, some grassroots level leaders of BNP and Jamaat said they had taken up the strategy to defeat the ruling Awami League-backed candidates.

Mashiur Rahman, BNP-backed chairman candidate in Bagharpara upazila, said they were contesting the polls being backed by the 19-party alliance of which BNP and Jamaat are the key components.

"If we contest the election together and pick one candidate for

each post, it will fetch better results and strengthen our politics at local levels," he said.

Asked whether they forged consensus on instructions from the BNP high command, Mashiur said they were following the guidelines of the district leaders.

In Bagharpara, Jamaat is backing Mashiur while his party BNP is supporting Jamaat leaders for two vice-chairman posts.

Nasir Haider, vice-chairman aspirant from Jamaat, said the consensus would bridge the gap between the BNP and Jamaat, if there was any.

Hafizur Rahman, BNP-backed candidate for the chairman post in Baghatipara upazila in Natore, said the decision of contesting the polls with support from the BNP-led alliance had been made locally.

Jamaat men are backing Hafizur while the BNP is supporting the vice-chairman aspirants from Jamaat in Baghatipara.

Abdur Rahim, Jamaat-backed vice chairman candidate in Feni Sadar Upazila, said: "We are contesting the polls unitedly, so that we can

bag an easy victory over the Awami League-blessed candidate."

He also claimed that there had been no gap between the BNP and Jamaat.

In the first phase of the upazila elections held on February 19, Jamaat-backed candidates won 12 chairman and 30 vice-chairman posts. The party believes it would do better in the second phase.

As part of their strategy, the BNP and Jamaat have begun dialogue in a bid to pick single candidate for each post in upazilas that are yet to go to polls.

In Shibganj upazila of Chapainawabganj, the BNP has supported a Jamaat leader for the chairman post while Jamaat has backed BNP men for the vice-chairman posts.

District unit leaders of both the parties reached the consensus after a meeting on Monday held at the house of BNP district unit president Shahjahan Miah.

"We waged all our movements together with jammat. That is why we have decided to pick single candidate on behalf of our alliance. We are confident about our victory,"

Cabinet expands

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minister Major (ret'd) Rafiqul Islam, have cropped up in the run-up to the expansion.

President Abdul Hamid will administer the oaths at the Bangabhaban at 12:00 noon. The prime minister, members of her cabinet and senior civil and military officials will be present at the function.

Ali was inducted into Hasina's previous cabinet as relief and disaster management minister in September 2012.

He was elected from Dinajpur-4 (Chirirbandar-Khansama) on January 16, 11 days after the 10th parliamentary election as voting at 57 polling centres in the constituency had been marred by violence and disruption, forcing the Election Commission to order re-polls.

Earlier on January 12, AL President Sheikh Hasina formed the cabinet with lawmakers from four other parties -- Jatiya Party, Workers Party, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and Jatiya Party-Manju -- besides those from her party.

The existing cabinet has 29 full ministers, excluding the PM, 17 state ministers and two deputy ministers. Of the ministers, only four have been elected through votes, while the rest have been elected uncontested.

Two technocrats have also made it to the cabinet -- Matiur Rahman as religious affairs minister and Yeafesh Osman as state minister for science and technology.

Judiciary

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of imaginary incidents of crossfire and encounters, these killings and disappearances are against the rule of law, and human rights," he told a discussion at the Supreme Court auditorium.

The SC chapter of Bangladesh Democratic Lawyers' Association (BDLA) organised the programme on "Constitution of 1972 is a Document of Bangladesh's Existence".

The rights chief said changes to the constitution by different autocratic regimes have damaged the fundamentals of the '72 constitution, and thus put the religious minorities under security threats through incorporating provisions that prioritise a certain religion.

"This has been reflected in the communal attacks on the religious minorities during and after the last parliamentary polls," he mentioned.

Law Minister Anisul Haque said the incumbent government will bring back the fundamental spirit of the '72 constitution gradually if it can continue in power for five years.

It is critical to maintain constitutional process in the country, and the January 5 national election was part of that effort, he added.

Eminent columnist Syed Abul Maksud, Ainjibi Shamannay Parishad convenor Abdul Baset Majumder and lawyers' leader MA Taher addressed the programme, chaired by BDLA president MA Kuddus.

Bridge is a game

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part in a pursuit that is recognised as a sport by the International Olympic Committee, the Charity Commission and several other European countries.

It pointed out that croquet, darts, billiards and gliding were regarded as sports by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) even though "physical skill or activity plays second fiddle to mental skill".

Playing bridge regularly promotes both physical and mental health, and studies have shown that it may benefit the immune system and reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's Disease, the English Bridge Union argued.

However, the Tax Chamber of the First-Tier Tribunal rejected the claim, concluding that contract bridge does not involve a "significant amount" of physical activity.

Judge Charles Hellier said: "To our minds, sport normally connotes a game with an athletic element, rather than simply a game."

The English Bridge Union brought the case against HMRC in an attempt to reclaim the VAT paid on bridge competition entry fees between June 2008 and December 2011.

Dismissing the appeal, Judge Hellier concluded: "Contract bridge involves some physical activity, but not a significant amount."

"The physical activity is not the aim of participation and physical skill, as opposed to purely mental skill, is not particularly important to the outcome of participation."

Ministers, MPs accuse Khaleda of Qaeda links

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Ruling alliance lawmakers including two senior ministers yesterday in parliament accused BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Jamaat-Shibir leaders of having links to al-Qaeda and Taliban.

They also alleged the BNP chief and Jamaat-Shibir were "again promoting militancy in the country".

Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury blasted BNP acting secretary general Fakhru Islam Alamgir for what she said was his sympathy for JMB militant Rakib Hasan, killed in a "shootout" with police on Monday hours after his recapture.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was present in parliament at that time.

Matia said, "BNP and Jamaat's ties with militant and terrorist groups including al-Qaeda and Taliban are nothing new. They are never ashamed of themselves for cooperating with militant outfits."

The agriculture minister also lambasted some Dhaka-based diplomats for "communicating with various militant outfits including Hefajat-e-Islam".

She said, "Some foreign diplomats speak against militant and terrorist groups. At the same time, they nourish and patronise militant outfits. When those militant organisations come to power, these diplo-

mats keep good relations with them."

Matia blasted Fakhru for his recent comment that al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri visited Bangladesh during the AL's past tenure.

Citing a report published in Time Magazine on October 20, 2002, Matia said during the last BNP-Jamaat rule, the present al-Qaeda chief visited Bangladesh three times and the then government extended warm hospitality to him.

Mentioning a recent report of a US-based research group that branded Islami Chhatra Shibir, student front of Jamaat-e-Islami, a key component in the BNP-led 19-party alliance, the minister said Jamaat and Shibir are directly involved with Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Besides her, Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed, senior AL lawmaker Sheikh Fazlu Karim Selim, opposition chief whip ABM Tajul Islam, AL MP Nozibul Bashar Maizbhandari and Workers Party's Fazle Hossain Badsha accused Khaleda, and Jamaat-Shibir of patronising militancy.

Some of them went on to allege the BNP might have been involved in Sunday's snatching of the three convicted JMB men from a prison van.

Tofail said the government would take actions if there prove to be lapses in security measures in transporting the convicted JMB men from Kashimpur jail to Mymensingh.

Sri Lanka draw first blood

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the hosts if the wickets at Fatullah are anything to go by. If the powerful Indian batting line-up gets first use of the wicket, things may turn sour for the Tigers very quickly. India may bat first anyway as the Tigers will be wary of fielding second under lights, with the dew factor and their slew of spinners.

With Tamim Iqbal out injured and Shakib Al Hasan currently serving a three-match ban, Bangladesh will bear a slightly different look. Ziaur Rahman may take the place of the dropped Mahmudullah Riyad as the seam-bowling all-rounder at number seven. Naeem Islam is likely to bat at number five in Shakib's absence and Arafat

Sunny, who played in the 3-0 defeat to Sri Lanka, will likely make way for returning veteran left-arm spinner Abdur Razzak.

India, although without regular captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni, will look to batting tyro Virat Kohli to provide guidance and make a turnaround of their own after winless tours of South Africa and New Zealand.

Although the form book favours India heavily, fans will remember that the Tigers tend to lift when they play India and the players will draw upon memories of the rousing victory over the same opponents in the previous edition in 2012. Also, it seems the Tigers are just one victory away from regaining confidence, and one against India

Quasem led Al-Badr

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under Quasem's leadership, said the 62-year-old witness.

Earlier in the day, Nazim Uddin, the 11th prosecution witness in the case and also a captive of the camp, said he had learnt from other detainees that Dalim Hotel was a Quasem-controlled torture centre.

Quasem, a member of Jamaat's central executive committee, is facing 14 charges for his alleged involvement in crimes against humanity committed in Chittagong during the nine-month-long war.

The tribunal yesterday ordered a junior counsel of Quasem to go out of the courtroom for "side-talking" during the proceedings. The lawyer complied with the order.

During his 28-minute testimony, Hasan of Sabanghata said he was a class IX student in 1971 and went into hiding after the war began. He returned home in August.

Around 3:00am on November 30, Al-Badr men surrounded their house and detained 20/25 people including him and his father under the leadership of Quasem and took them to NMC High School, he said.

"Then, Mir Quasem Ali left the place keeping us under the surveillance of Al-Badr men," he said.

"Mir Quasem Ali was familiar to me since 1970, when he was studying in Chittagong College. He [Quasem] was the president of Islami Chhatra Sangha [the then student wing of Jamaat] of Chittagong College unit," said Hasan.

At sunrise, Al-Badr men brought two other groups of people (to the school) and put all the detainees on two trucks, he said, adding: "My father Abdus Sattar, Moulana Nurul Islam and I had been released."

Hasan said the detainees got released after liberation and it had been learnt from

them that they had been kept detained inside Dalim Hotel under Quasem's leadership.

"I have seen torture marks on their [detainees'] bodies," said Hasan, who identified Quasem in the dock.

Before Hasan's testimony, the 57-year-old Nazim Uddin, of Golamali Najirbari area in Chittagong, said Al-Badr men picked him up and his cousins -- Chutu Mia, Zakaria, Iskandar -- and several others around 4:00am on November 30.

They were first brought to NMC High School and later taken to Dalim Hotel by trucks, he said. Zakaria and Iskandar also testified in the case.

Nazim said he was kept confined in a room of the hotel and after an hour or two, Al-Badr men took some detainees away from the room and brought them back after two hours.

"I saw torture marks on their [detainees'] bodies. 'I will be tortured too,' the injured told me," Nazim said, adding: "They [the injured] also told me that it [hotel] was a torture centre controlled by Mir Quasem Ali."

He also said after three or four days, Al-Badr men produced him before Quasem who inquired about the whereabouts of freedom fighters. But he couldn't reveal any information.

"Then Mir Quasem Ali said: 'You are getting released due to lobbying by your father. However, you will inform me whenever you get any information about freedom fighters,'" said Nazim.

After their testimonies, Quasem's counsel Mizanul Islam completed cross-examining them before the two-member tribunal led by Justice Md Mozibur Rahman Miah with Justice Md Shahinur Islam adjourned the case proceeding until March 3.



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