

BANGLADESHIS IN SPECIAL CATEGORIES

India says no to visa relaxation

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian home ministry has rejected the external affairs ministry's proposal to grant visa-on-arrival facility to Bangladeshi nationals and visa-free entry to its citizens under the age of 18 and over 65.

The home ministry's response came after the Indian foreign ministry had asked the former to give its opinion on the inclusion of the two issues as part of the tentative agenda of discussions during the visit of External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to Bangladesh from June 25 to 27.

"We have rejected outright the two proposals. We have already communicated to the external affairs ministry our strong objection to the proposals," a home ministry official said yesterday.

The issue has generated strong reaction in north-eastern state of Assam where Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi opposed the move and

slammed the Narendra Modi government for toying with the idea.

Gogoi's reaction came after the Indian foreign ministry sought the opinion of Assam government, among other stakeholders, on the two issues.

The Home Ministry, however, did not completely rule out another proposal by the external affairs ministry of long-term multiple entry tourist visas for Bangladeshis under 18 and over 65.

"This proposal can be considered on certain conditions, including appearance of the visa-holder before the Foreigner Regional Registration Office every year," the Home Ministry official said.

Currently, Bangladeshis get multiple-entry visa for one year and the proposal is for five years.

During her visit, Swaraj is likely to meet President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and discuss a range of issues including

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PHOTO: BSS

Flanked by top party leaders, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina places a wreath before the portrait of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Dhanmondi-32, marking the founding anniversary of the ruling party yesterday.

8 Huji men to walk

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filed over the incident.

There had been bomb attacks on people and organisations for political and other reasons, and such incidents also happened in Bangladesh. "But this incident [Ramna blasts] is totally different," said the judge.

"It [Pahela Baishakh] was a public celebration." There were no social, religious or other disputes between the victims and the attackers, he said.

"The attack was actually carried out with an aim to create panic among people and an unstable situation in the country."

The Pahela Baishakh celebrations, which Chhayanaut has been organising at Ramna Batamul in the capital from 1960s, have always drawn a huge crowd every year.

"This might be the reason why they [the attackers] chose Ramna Batamul for carrying out the bomb attack," he said.

Since Chhayanaut's programme doesn't publicise against any section of people, community or religion, there is no reason for any conflicts with any social or religious groups, the court observed.

Pakistan. He, however, couldn't say anything on the whereabouts of the other four.

Punishment of the fugitives will take effect from the day of their arrest or surrender.

Except for Suman, all the accused were dressed in panjabi, pyjamas and topi. They were mumbling before the pronouncement of the verdict.

Hearing the judgment, some of them looked upset while some remained nonchalant.

Family members of the victims, the prosecution, the accused and the defence expressed mixed reactions over the verdict.

Both the prosecution and the defence said they would challenge the verdict at the High Court.

SM Zahid Sardar, a prosecutor in the case, said they were not fully satisfied as six of the accused were given "lenient punishment". They would file an appeal against the life sentence given to the six, he added.

Faruque Ahmed, counsel for one of the accused, claimed the prosecution failed to prove many things as there was no eye-witness in the case.

It was so easy to kill people

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al Islami (Huji).

The trio walked up to the venue of the Chhayanaut cultural programme at Ramna Batamul where the law enforcers frisked them. After the checking, Arif started gossiping with a policeman and thus kept him engaged.

Taking the chance, Suhan quickly went back to Johnny and walked to the programme venue with the bomb and a packet of chips, clearly deceiving the police.

Without wasting time, they then planted the bomb and returned.

This was how the deadly blast was carried out at Ramna Batamul on April 14, 2001, killing 10 people and injured score others.

The blast at the Ramna Batamul did not happen suddenly. It had a well-orchestrated plan chalked out 8-10 days earlier.

Several Huji men gathered at a mosque near Rahmania Arabia Madrasa in Mohammadpur and made the initial plan. Later, they sat at Huji's metropolitan office near the

Shia mosque in the area.

Dhaka city operations head Abu Taher and Maulana Sheikh Farid proposed the plan for the deadly attack. Other Huji leaders present there accepted it but suggested taking permission from Huji chief Shafiqur Rahman.

The Huji ameer opted for a light explosion so that people were not harmed. He also gave the responsibility to assemble the bomb to Huji leaders Sabbir and Jahangir Badr.

Making the bomb successfully, they handed it over to Huji leader Moulana Tajuddin, a brother of detained BNP leader and former deputy minister in the BNP-led alliance government Abdus Salam Pintu.

Tajuddin then assigned four young Huji activists to execute the plan. Even a day before Pahela Baishakh, the four went to recce the targeted spot to ensure that their plan did not fail.

Tajuddin had asked Arif (full name Arif Hasan Sumon) to meet him again at 4:00am next day.

When he came, he found Johnny, Jewel and Suhan with the taxicab. The driver was none but Halim, who once had served as the driver of the personal car of Tajuddin. And they left for the mission.

After accomplishing their mission, Arif and Johnny returned to Mohammadpur in the taxicab.

Arif got down at Mohammadpur Bus Stand and from there went to his residence at Ali and Noor Real Estate in the area.

When Arif was staying at home his two other friends informed him about the bomb attack at Ramna Batamul.

He then started searching for Tajuddin and found him in front of a phone shop in the area.

"You are also involved in the attack. Do not disclose it to anybody," Tajuddin told Arif as he met him there. As a reward, two days after the grizzly attack Tajuddin gave Arif a mobile phone as a gift.

[The report is based on depositions of some of the accused in the Ramna Batamul blast case.]

From teacher to terrorist

SHAKHAWAT LITON and CHAITANYA CHANDRA HALDER

He began his career as a madrasa teacher with the intention of disseminating Islamic knowledge among his students. But teaching was not something he actually wanted to take up as a profession for the rest of his life. Mufti Abdul Hannan finally emerged as a notorious militant leader in the country.

His organisation, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami (Huji), jolted the country through a series of gruesome terror attacks on cultural and political programmes, including the August 21 grenade attack on an Awami League rally to assassinate Sheikh Hasina.

Mufti Hannan joined the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. His return to the country turned out to be a curse for his own motherland.

He went to Pakistan to study higher Islamic education at a madrasa in Karachi in the 1980s.

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Akbar: Death Penalty



Rouf: Life imprisonment



Yahia: Life imprisonment



Jewel: Life imprisonment

Two bombs went off during the celebrations of Bangla New Year, 1408 (on April 14, 2001) at Ramna Batamul. Ten people were killed and dozens injured. The incident followed three major bomb attacks in a span of only two years since March 1999.

Pronouncing the verdict at a crowded courtroom from 11:43am, the judge said the prosecution had proved the charges "beyond a shadow of a doubt" against all 14 accused in the killing case.

The accused who got capital punishment are Mufti Abdul Hannan Munshi, Moulana Akbar Hossain alias Helaluddin, Moulana Mohammad Tajuddin, Hafez Jahangir Alam Badar, Moulana Abu Bakar alias Selim Hawlader, Mufti Shafiqur Rahman, Mufti Abdul Hye and Arif Hasan Suman.

"The accused will be hanged till they are dead," said the verdict.

The court awarded life imprisonment to Moulana Abu Taher, Moulana Sabbir alias Abdul Hannan, Moulana Yahia, Moulana Shawkat Osman alias Sheikh Farid, Moulana Abdul Rouf and Shahadat Ullah alias Jewel.

Jewel and Taher were given life sentences taking into consideration their poor physical condition.

The court fined all life term awardees Tk 50,000 each, in default of which they will have to be in jail for another year.

Of the convicts, nine were produced before the court in fetters at 10:50am amid tight security. The rest are on the run.

The fugitives are Tajuddin, younger brother of BNP leader Abdus Salam Pintu, Hafez Jahangir, Moulana Abu Bakar, Mufti Shafiqur Rahman and Mufti Hye.

Metropolitan Public Prosecutor Abdullah Abu said Tajuddin is now in

He said they would move to the HC and challenge the death penalty and life sentence.

Claiming himself innocent, Huji leader Hannan said the judgment was government-dictated.

The militant leader said he didn't get justice, and would appeal against the verdict at the HC.

Moulana Sabbir, who got life term, claimed he had been implicated in this "false case".

The long-awaited verdict came after the case proceedings saw many ups and downs with changes of six investigating officers in the two cases -- one for the killing and the other under the Explosive Substances Act -- filed with Ramna Police Station soon after the incident.

It took the investigators more than seven years to trace Huji's links with the attack.

On November 30, 2008, CID inspector Abu Hena Mohammad Yusuf, the seventh investigating officer, pressed charges against the 14 Huji leaders and activists in the two cases.

During the trial of the murder case, the prosecution produced 61 witnesses, including eyewitness and victims, to prove the charges against the accused.

The defence didn't produce any witnesses but three accused, including Hannan, had given confessional statements.

The other case filed under the Explosive Substances Act remains stuck.

In 2009, Dhaka Speedy Trial Tribunal-1 sought the Supreme Court registrar's opinion on whether both the cases could be tried together. The registrar has not yet given any response.

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ministry through Muhiuddin to have his name dropped from the case over the August 21 grenade attack on an Awami League rally in the capital in 2004. The attack was aimed at assassinating AL President Sheikh Hasina, then leader of the opposition.

The AL chief narrowly escaped the attack that claimed the lives of 24 leaders and workers of her party.

Hannan's fate became uncertain after Altaf was removed from the helm of the home ministry in April 2005 for his poor performance.

The situation turned worse for him a few months later when the banned Islamist outfit JMB carried out countrywide serial bomb blasts in August 2005.

The serial blasts caused a huge uproar and the government came under immense pressure to launch a crackdown on Islamist militants.

In a drive, the law enforcers finally arrested Hannan and top JMB men in early October that year. A few days into his capture, the Huji was also banned.

The arrest took Hannan by surprise. He claimed the law enforcers were not

supposed to arrest him since some influential ministers of the BNP-led government had assured him that he would be exempted from the August 21 grenade attack case.

Hannan submitted a mercy petition to the prime minister, home minister and several other ministers, and received positive responses from them.

They assured him that he would be let off. Some BNP leaders had even recommended withdrawing the cases filed against the Huji leader.

Like other Islamist militants, the Huji leader had enjoyed the BNP government's blessing for around four years during the four-party alliance's tenure from 2001.

Proceedings in some cases against Hannan were stalled, as the BNP-led government was reluctant to have the cases disposed of.

A glaring example is the murder case filed over the Ramna Batamul blast in 2001. It reflects the politics of patronising Islamist militants in the country.

In a confessional statement in June 2001, Moulana Akbar Hossain, an accused in the case, gave details of how

Attack on free minds

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But, eventually, in Bangladesh it was the progressive and cultural forces which became the main targets of Huji. The organisation carried out a number of gruesome terror attacks.

Udichi, a non-communal and progressive cultural organisation which believes in employing music for political purposes, became the target of the first blow when Huji men carried out a deadly blast at its programme in Jessore in 1999, killing at least 12 people and injuring more than a hundred.

At a meeting at their Mohammadpur office, the Huji men worked out the plan for the attack and decided to stop the "naked musical performances" of Udichi. Getting a nod from the organisation's Ameer Shafiqur Rahman, a team went on a recce and reported back to their chief.

Later, two Huji men-- Sabbir and Musa-- were assigned to make some bombs and use them at the venue of the Udichi programme if the cultural organisation went ahead with arranging musical shows.

Two youths namely Abdullah, aged about 17, from Chittagong, and Waliur, 20, from Jessore planted the bombs that went off between 12:30am and 1:00am on March 7.

With the cultural and progressive organisations reeling from the Udichi shock, Huji men carried out another blast

at the traditional celebrations of the Bangla New Year 1408 (April 14, 2001) at the Ramna Batamul, leaving 10 people killed. Scores of others were wounded.

For years, thousands of people from all strata of the society have been gathering at the traditional centre of celebration around the Ramna Park to welcome the first day of the Bangla year with music, fanfare and colourful processions. The leading cultural platform Chhayanaut organises the event every year.

Huji men had also made an attempt in January 1999 to kill the renowned poet Shamsur Rahman, an outspoken opponent of religious fundamentalism.

Besides cultural forces, the then Awami League government, which assumed power in 1996, also became the Huji's target as the government supported a High Court's landmark verdict banning fatwa.

The government adopted a hardline position in resisting the rowdy protests by Islamic parties on the fatwa issue.

Irate with the government's move, the Huji men at a meeting at Mohammadpur decided to carry out attacks on leaders and activists of the AL, terming the party anti-Islamic and an agent of India involved in attempts to destroy Islam.

With a nod from its leader Shafiqur Rahman, Huji decided to carry out a bomb attack on Sheikh Hasina at Kotlailpara, where she was supposed to

attend a function in July 2000.

They planted the ammunition on the east of the stage, erected for Hasina near a pond and another near the helipad. Later, police recovered a 76-kg bomb there.

Huji men again attempted to assassinate Hasina by launching a grenade attack on an AL rally on August 21, 2004 in the capital. Hasina narrowly escaped, but 24 leaders and activists of her party were killed.

In 2004, Huji carried out a grenade attack on the then British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury at Hazrat Shahjalal's shrine in Sylhet, killing three and injuring around dozens. The blast left the British envoy injured.

The organisation also carried out other terror attacks, including one on a rally of AL leader Suranjit Sengupta in Sunamganj in July 2001, and on the Sylhet City Corporation mayor in December 2005.

Facing a ban in 2005, former Huji men also made attempts to emerge as a political force. In their bid, they formed the Islamic Democratic Party in May 2008. The party consisted of 200 to 300 Afghan war returnees and applied to the Election Commission for registration as a parliamentary party.

The EC rejected their application. #

[The report was prepared on the basis of the charge sheet, depositions of the accused in the Ramna Batamul blast case, and newspaper reports.]