

Nonstop blockade hampers fertiliser distribution

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU, *Pabna*

At the peak of the Boro season, the ongoing BNP-led 20-party blockade is severely hampering the distribution of imported fertiliser to the 16 northern districts.

Visiting the Baghabari port in Sirajganj and Nagarbari port in Pabna, this correspondent saw a huge stock of chemical fertiliser being kept under the open sky.

Officials said there were over 50 thousand metric tonnes of fertiliser.

The stock was increasing every day as many truck owners refuse to carry the fertiliser to the districts, fearing vandalism and arson attacks on the vehicles, which have been a common aspect of the blockade.

On the other hand, the quality of the fertiliser was decreasing as those were coming in contact with rain, fog and sunlight.

Shukdeb Kumar, in-charge of a depot in the Baghabari port, said there was 15,278 metric tonnes of fertiliser at the depot though it had the capacity of 6,000 metric tonnes.

He said earlier the port used to release 700 metric tonnes of fertiliser every day, but currently it was not more than 400 metric tonnes.

Rafiqul Islam, a trader, told The Daily Star at the Nagarbari port: "Now only 10 fertiliser-laden truck leave the port for the northern districts every day. The number was at least 100 before the blockade."

The government usually imports the fertiliser from countries like China, Egypt and Saudi Arabia through the Chittagong port.

The fertiliser is then carried to the two ports via Narayanjanj. Later, it is distributed among the farmers of the 16 northern districts, said sources.



A huge stock of fertiliser piled up at Nagarbari Port by the river Jamuna in Pabna.

PHOTO: STAR

Blockade to continue

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locking of the BNP headquarters at Nayapaltan.

The protests turned violent, with at least 25 people already killed, mostly in arson attacks.

In a late night development, the 20-party alliance called a 48-hour shutdown in Dhaka district, including the capital, and Khulna division from 6:00am tomorrow, protesting the arrests and "oppression" of its leaders.

Sayrul Kabir Khan, a member of BNP chairperson's media wing, confirmed this to The Daily Star, quoting party Joint Secretary General Rizvi Ahmed.

The opposition alliance also called a 36-hour shutdown in Chittagong division and Rajshahi city beginning 6:00am today, protesting arrests of party leaders and demanding their release.

Meanwhile, Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, a pro-BNP student body, has called a two-day-long strike at all education institutions across the country from Wednesday protesting killings, forced disappearances, abduction and

arrest of its leaders.

In its reaction, the ruling Awami League expressed frustration over Khaleda's statement, saying the blockade was meant to continue violence and killings.

THE PRESS CONFERENCE

At the news briefing that began around 6:30pm, Khaleda held the government and the ruling party responsible for the killings.

She said the current crisis was not a law and order situation. "It is rather a political problem. We once again call upon the government to take initiatives to resolve this stalemate politically."

On the withdrawal of police barricade, the former prime minister said, "I welcome the government if they did it out of good sense."

Asked if she planned to go to her Gulshan residence now that she was "free", Khaleda said she would stay at her office for now as she had works to do.

"When I will be able to visit any place of my choice, then I will realise that the government has withdrawn the barricade."

Alleging that joint forces were creating a reign of terror in different parts of the country, she said the officials involved in the killing and oppression would be brought to justice in future.

On why her alliance called the blockade, she said, "Despite the government's continuous oppression, killing and attack on the opposition, we had repeatedly urged the government to sit for talks for holding an acceptable and inclusive election. We had also placed a seven-point proposal as the basis for the dialogue but they rejected our proposal instantly and chose the path of suppression by using arms."

"Against this backdrop, we had no alternative but to enforce a country-wide peaceful blockade. The programme will continue until further announcement."

PARTY MEN BARRED

Law enforcement agencies cordoned off BNP founder Ziaur Rahman's grave at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar and barred party leaders and activists from visiting the grave yesterday.

Yesterday was the 79th birth anni-

versary of the late president.

This correspondent saw only four floral wreaths on the grave under the banners of BNP, Mahila Dal, Tanti Dal and Jatiyatabadi Samajik Sangskritik Sangstha.

Police allegedly allowed only three to four persons in each team and barred the rest.

The BNP claimed the government deployed a huge number of law enforcers around parliament and the Crescent Lake to stop its men.

But law enforcers said security was beefed up around the Sangsad Bhaban as parliament went into its fifth session yesterday.

Contacted, Biplob Kumar Saha, deputy commissioner (Tejgaon zone) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said they were not allowing people to gather in the area in groups for security reasons.

Ishtiaq Aziz Ulfat, president of Jatiyatabadi Muktiyoddha Dal, alleged police did not allow them to visit the grave.

THE PULL OUT

The police pull out from near Khaleda's office was as dramatic as their

deployment had been. They took position in front of the office around midnight of January 3 and left early hours yesterday. The two police vans and the water cannon that were placed on the two ends of the road left the area around 2:30am. The law enforcers left in two groups, one group around 3:30am and the other around 11:00am.

Police officials would not comment on their pull out, but one constable on condition of anonymity said, "We are returning to our stations on instructions of higher authorities."

After the withdrawal of the additional forces, BNP chairperson's personal security team along with the four to five duty policemen took position at the gate.

Since the locking of the office, entrance of party leaders and activists was restricted. Police allowed only a few senior party colleagues, lawyers and pro-BNP professional body leaders to call on her with prior permission from them.

Entrance of journalists was totally restricted since January 5.

Foreign diplomats

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US, UN, China, Japan, Brazil, Australia, North Korea and South Korea attended the briefing organised as part of the foreign minister's regular consultations with ambassadors and heads of mission in Dhaka.

Australian High Commissioner Greg Wilcock, US Embassy Chargé d'affaires David Meale, Acting UN Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh and Country Representative of UNFPA Ms Argentina Piccin, and North Korean Ambassador Ri Song Hyun spoke on the occasion, said diplomatic sources.

About an hour later, Foreign Secretary Md Shahidul Haque told reporters at the foreign ministry, "They [the diplomats] strongly condemned the destructive activities and arson attacks. These acts are in no way acceptable."

They said democracy cannot be strengthened through destructive activities, and hoped violence would end making way for democracy to flourish in Bangladesh in the coming days.

Meeting sources said the US diplomat raised the issues of the BNP chairperson's confinement and arrests of opposition activists.

Expressing frustration at the ongoing political violence and intimidation, he noted that the current political

crisis is seriously hampering bilateral cooperation in development programmes.

David Meale stressed the need for bringing an end to political tensions through a peaceful solution, and urged the government to ensure that people can freely exercise their right to peaceful political expression.

Interestingly, the North Korean envoy sought from the foreign minister "authentic information" on Bangladesh's current political situation for sending it to Pyongyang.

He told the minister that media reports made him confused about the present situation.

Taking the floor, Australian High Commissioner Greg Wilcock said the international community wants to see a political solution to the current political crisis, according to the meeting sources.

Later, Greg Wilcock issued a press statement, saying, "Today [Monday] and in recent days, I have had the opportunity to speak to government and opposition leaders about Bangladesh's current troubles."

"On behalf of Australia, I have condemned, without qualification, the continuing political violence in Bangladesh," he said.

Talking to reporters at the foreign ministry around 4:00pm, Shahidul said the foreign minister briefed the diplomats about the current political

situation and the government's position, and also shared with them the government's diplomatic successes in the last one year.

The diplomats highly appreciated Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's stance against terrorism, said Shahidul.

On media reports on BJP President Amit Shah's phone call to Khaleda Zia, and six US congressmen's statement "expressing concern over recent political situation in Bangladesh", the foreign minister told the diplomats that both the claims were found to be absolutely false.

"Those two claims were baseless. He [foreign minister] made it clear to them," Shahidul told reporters.

At the meeting with the diplomats, the minister made a reference to last year's European Parliament Resolutions on Bangladesh condemning such violence and terrorist acts, and their call for a ban on political parties resorting to such acts.

On January 14, Mahmood briefed the ambassadors of EU countries and the head of the EU Delegation in Bangladesh on the current political situation. He also held talks with the ambassadors of Russia, Norway, the Holy See and Switzerland separately the same day.

The foreign minister is expected to brief diplomats from OIC member states and Saarc and Asean countries today.

Enough, no?

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Indeed, it is sickening to think that after every such death the BNP leader and her party men would pat themselves on their backs for a job well done, and smell power. Why, Khaleda Zia, a three-time prime minister, has never once offered an apology to the families for all these deaths and destructions for which her party men are believed to be responsible. Nor has she asked her party men not to attack and kill us. No less sickening is the thought that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her ruling party men would praise themselves for their "success" in keeping Khaleda locked in her office while the whole country burns. Hasina, also a three-time PM, too never apologised for her failure to save all these lives, which she is oath-bound to. While basking in success, politicians may think good times never end. They always do.

We cannot teach our politicians politics, but exercising one's political right to demonstrate and killing innocent men, women and children are two so different things that they do not warrant an elucidation. We have seen political demonstrations in the civilized world, most recently in Hong Kong. Killing spree we have seen none. At the core of why many western countries do not have the death penalty is this old verse: Thou shalt not kill. In Bangladesh, we kill in peace time as if it were war time, as if our lives depended on it. Here, policemen kill, Rab men kill, BNP men kill, Awami League men kill, Jamaat men kill. One wonders if any other nation has so many groups to kill its fellow men.

But what is all the more perplexing

is the rationale behind the government keeping Khaleda confined to her office and giving her an excuse for continuing with the blockade and hence all this bloodshed. In an ideal world, freedom has no limit (though one must enjoy it responsibly). But for argument's sake, let's pretend it has. What, then, is Khaleda's limit? To move between her home and her office and not go anywhere else? If this be freedom, what do we call a several hundred yards long iron shackle tied to one's leg while its other end remains in the hands of an invisible master who would allow only as much? And if freedom has a limit, must its restrictions not have a limit as well?

To return to Selina, the mother of nobody for nobody will call her mother ever more. But she had her Sohag to call her so, maybe hundred times a day, until Friday of course. Today, the apple of her eye sleeps in the cold as politicians ready themselves for show time. In one sense, it's been a good thing that Selina is blind, that she hasn't seen how terribly deformed the body of her son became. But for those who have seen it, haven't we seen enough? If that is not enough, what about the other bodies burnt beyond recognition and equally deformed, including the child who literally turned into a piece of coal in an arson attack on a running bus in Rangpur? Selina Begums cannot be one of our two leaders, but in their imagination can the prime minister and the BNP chief become one of them, just to stop this madness?

We feel humiliated and almost hate it when some western newspapers call our two leaders "Battling Begums" and "Drama Queens".

Schools struggle

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suspended this week.

"I'm gripped by anxiety when I take my kid to school. This sudden closure will allay my fears at least for now, but things cannot go on like this," the parent observed.

"We don't think the politicians ever care about us and the future of millions of students. Otherwise, they would not allow such destructive activities in the name of politics," said another parent whose son studies in class-III at Foundation School in Lalmatia.

Some of the guardians said they had received emails from the schools with recommended study materials and homework.

Scholastica in Uttara, said the school reopened on January 9 after a vacation but could not take classes, as few students turned up. The school was sending homework and recommended reading through emails and has asked the students to complete closure homework, he added.

Though some schools have suspended classes in the last two days due to the blockade violence, Sunday's arson attack in which two students of Eden College suffered burns near the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban added to their anxiety.

"Yesterday's [Sunday's] incident shows it can happen to anybody anytime," said a senior teacher at Dhanmondi Tutorial.

However, a number of teachers said

Sunday's incident was not the only reason behind the suspension.

Against such a situation, some schools remain open, but they are not taking classes, insiders say.

The current political unrest is taking a heavy toll also on more than four crore students of primary and secondary levels as it is seriously disrupting their academic activities.

Though most of the Bangla medium schools in the city remain opened, students' presence is very thin.

"We don't see any immediate solution to the ongoing stalemate. If it continues for long, we will be in trouble to complete the syllabus," said a teacher of Viqarunnisa Noon School.

Shashi Tharoor questioned by Delhi cops over wife's death

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, *New Delhi*

Former UN diplomat and Congress leader Shashi Tharoor was questioned for over two hours yesterday by a special five-member team of Delhi Police in connection with the murder of his wife Sunanda Pushkar.

Sunanda was found dead in a five-star hotel room in Delhi last January, two days after she alleged on Twitter that her husband had been having an affair with a Pakistani journalist.

Sources said Tharoor was asked about the 15 injuries on Sunanda's body, especially injury number ten which was an injection mark as the medical report has indicated that the poison which caused her death could have either been taken orally or injected.

He was also asked about the reason of the tiff the couple had on the flight from Thiruvananthapuram to Delhi on January 15 following which she left him at the airport and checked in at the five-star hotel.

He was also questioned about whether she was suffering from any disease and the kind of medication she was taking. Police also asked him about the empty Alprax tablets which were found in the hotel room and who used to consume it as the viscera tests were found negative for it.

Tharoor was questioned nearly three weeks after a case of murder was registered on the basis of a medical report that concluded that she died of poisoning.

Earlier this month, Delhi Police Commissioner Bhim Sain Bassi said new medical reports had led investigators to register a case of murder "against unknown persons".

Tharoor had served as under-secretary general during the tenure of Kofi Annan as UN Secretary General and was a candidate to replace him in 2008.

After losing the election to the post by Ban Ki-moon, he then entered Indian politics as a member of parliament from his home southern state of Kerala.

Power utilities

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under various slabs to encourage low use of power at individual user level.

This means the consumers' monthly power bill may shoot up significantly and affect their family budget.

According to the PDB, the country's power generation and consumption has jumped by 12 percent last year from the previous year. "We sold 4,000 crore units of power in 2013-14 which is up by 400 crore units from the previous year," said a PDB official.

This additional new electricity mostly came from fuel based plants and another part came from a new source -- imported power from India. The imported power costs around Tk 7 per unit whereas the gas based power costs Tk 2.5 to Tk 3.5 per unit.

This has imposed additional financial burden on the power board as well as the government that annually gives a subsidy of around Tk 6,000 crore.

"As per the current international oil price, the price of diesel should be Tk 26 per litre. But we are buying it for Tk 60 from Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation to supply that to the power companies," said a competent source.

Accordingly, use of petroleum in power generation has gone up to 28 percent from 17 percent in last one year.

Power generated by petroleum typically costs three to six times higher than gas fired electricity.

The BPC earlier told The Daily Star that the company was making profits after many years due to global price cut of petroleum. The government has no plans to slash the internal petroleum price.

On the other hand, use of gas, the country's cheapest primary fuel, in power generation has gone down significantly because the government could not increase gas supplies for power generation.

Years ago, natural gas fired more than 90 percent power plants of the country. In 2011-12, its share dropped to 77 percent and in 2013-14 it plummeted to 62 percent.

"Even the new 337 megawatt Meghnaghat dual fuel [can run on either gas or diesel] power plant that began partial operation last year is running entirely on diesel," said the source. "If they could provide us with gas, we would have saved a lot of money."

The picture may change this year because US energy giant Chevron has revived up gas production from its Bibiyana gas field from October last year. A part of this extra 300 million cubic feet per day (mmcf) gas would be used for generation of about 800 MW power, replacing the ongoing operation of the oil based rental power plants.