

No dialogue now

AL leaders tell EU delegation

The AL chief's Dhanmondi office barred The Daily Star reporter from covering the meeting between the party and the EU delegation without giving any reason. We, however, run the report based on information from secondary sources.

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Awami League will not sit in a dialogue with the BNP until the ongoing violence ceases, the ruling party told the visiting European Union parliamentary delegation yesterday.

"If it is necessary to hold talks with the BNP on free, fair and credible polls; strengthening the Election Commission or enacting a new law in this regard, the Awami League would do so," said Gowher Rizvi, prime minister's international affairs adviser.

He was briefing newsmen after a meeting with the delegates of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights at the AL chief's Dhanmondi office in the afternoon.

"The dialogue may be arranged before the next election. Containing violence is the first priority of the government at this moment," he added.

The AL, said Rizvi, would do everything within the constitutional and

democratic framework.

In the meeting, both the sides agreed that there is no scope for linking dialogue with violence, he mentioned.

The EU delegation was led by Christian Dan Preda, vice-chair of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights.

AL General Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam, PM's advisers HT Imam and Moshiur Rahman, AL leaders Dipu Moni, Faruq Khan, Abdus Sobhan Golap and Asim Kumar Ulkil attended the meeting.

Meeting sources said the EU team condemned State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam's comment that the EU delegation did not express concern over the human rights situation in Bangladesh.

The delegation said they have been here to express concern over the current situation. Shahriar made the comment while speaking to reporters at his office after a meeting with the EU delegation on Wednesday.

NHRC concerned over 'shootouts'

Commission chief briefs EP team on human rights situation in Bangladesh

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The National Human Rights Commission yesterday expressed concern over "shootouts" and "mass arrests" in a meeting with the visiting European Parliament (EP) delegation.

Answering to a query from the team about the commission's stance on "crossfire" or "encounter", the NHRC said it always stands against extrajudicial killings, says a press release of the commission.

The NHRC told the EP team that it regularly sends recommendations to the government to stop such killings.

Thirty-three people have so far been killed in "shootouts" or "gunfights" with law enforcers across the country since the BNP-led 20-party alliance declared an indefinite nationwide blockade on January 5. Of them, 20 were killed in "shootouts" with police, and 11 were killed in similar incidents with the Rapid Action Battalion, according to The Daily Star reports.

A NHRC team, led by its chairman Prof Mizanur Rahman, briefed the EP members on different aspects of the

country's human rights situation in the meeting at the NHRC office in the capital.

It was part of a series of meetings that the delegation of the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights is holding in Bangladesh.

"As per law, police can arrest any suspect.... But we are concerned when incidents like "mass arrests" take place. If the detention trade continues, it will create distrust among people about law enforcement agencies' acceptability," says the press release.

UNB adds that after the meeting, Christian Dan Preda, head of the delegation, told the media that they are very much concerned about Bangladesh's human rights situation.

Preda also cited a report published in The Daily Star yesterday quoting State Minister for Foreign Affairs M Shahriar Alam who said the EP team did not express any worry about the human rights situation.

Shahriar was talking to journalists after a meeting with the EP members on Wednesday.

Another arson victim

attack near Jhaoil over bridge point adjacent to Bangabandhu Bridge around 10:00pm yesterday, said police.

Members of Rapid Action Battalion, on information, recovered five crude bombs and two petrol bombs from the house of Nasir Uddin, a non-resident Bangladeshi, at Manikpur in Munshiganj on Wednesday night, police said.

Criminals set fire to a BNP office on KP Basu Road in Jhenidah around 12:30pm. Later, fire fighters doused the fire.

In Chittagong, a case was filed against 51 BNP-Jamaat men, including BNP Chittagong city unit General Secretary Shahadat Hossain, over petrol bomb attack on a mini bus at Tiger Pass area that left seven passengers injured early yesterday.

Police picked up six pro-BNP Jatiyatabadi Mohila Dal activists, including two former lawmakers, when they tried to supply food for BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and her office staff.

The detainees are Laila Begum and Nargis Ali, former lawmakers, and Shirin Akter Rina, Jharna Khan, Rokeya Sultana Tamanna and Nilufar Yasmin Nilu.

BNP THREATENS FRESH HARTAL

Amid the indefinite blockade, the BNP-led alliance yesterday threatened to enforce hartal from Sunday if the government did not meet its demand for holding a meaningful dialogue for an all-inclusive general elections.

"The 20-party alliance will be compelled to enforce hartal again alongside the ongoing blockade if the government does not accept the demand by this time," said BNP Joint Secretary General Salahuddin Ahmed in a statement yesterday.

"We are poor people. How will we survive if my husband does not work," said Sharifa Begum, wife of Ujjal, at the DMCH burn unit.

Meanwhile, criminals set fire to a carriage of Meghna Express while it was at Chandpur Railway Station around 4:00pm. Four seats were burnt, but none was injured.

In Sirajganj, at least five passengers received minor injuries while trying to get down from the bus hurriedly after it came under crude bomb

explosion.

Our district correspondents concerned contributed to the report.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on stage with the awardees of the Ekushey Padak of this year at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium in the capital yesterday. This year 15 people got the honour.

PHOTO: BSS

Tigers want

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their second Group A match, the weather gods greeted them with torrents of rain. It has been raining since and the prospects of a mouth-watering clash against cricket's predominant force looks at one of its most scared venues - the Gabba - looks quite bleak. News is tropical cyclone Marcia is heading towards the east coast and there is heavy rain forecast for tomorrow.

People are already talking about the prospects of a postponed match and thus sharing of points, and even some local and foreign journalists are seeing it as a blessing for the Tigers. The thought is that one point will brighten Bangladesh's chances of qualifying for the quarterfinals.

The Tigers, though, weren't quite of the same opinion. Having held a two-week pre-tournament camp here in Brisbane, the Tigers were looking forward to the prospect of taking on the favourites at their own backyard.

"I am saying from my heart that we want to play this match. And hope the weather will not spoil it," was Bangladesh skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's reply when his attention was drawn to the prospect of sharing of points.

"I don't know how the other people are thinking but the weather condition is really frustrating. Everybody is eager to play at the Gabba. Win or loss doesn't matter; it's an opportunity for us to

show our potential. It's always challenging to play in this kind of condition and when it is against Australia; but we are ready to take the challenge," opined the Bangladesh skipper.

Opening batsman Tamim Iqbal also echoed the sentiment of his captain.

"Personally I want to play. I am very much interested to play against this Australian attack at this venue because I want to see where I actually stand. MCG, SCG, Gabba - these are all dream grounds for any cricketer. I only watched these on television, so it's a great opportunity for us."

"You will understand my passion for these venues if I tell you a story," continued Tamim. "When I was at the MCG to watch Shakib's (Al Hasan) Big Bash match, I was looking for the spot where one of Shahid Afridi's sixes had landed during an international match. It was one of the biggest sixes to be ever hit."

After the Australia game, Bangladesh will play take on Sri Lanka at another iconic Australian venue - the MCG -- on February 26, before leaving for New Zealand. However they don't have any group match at the SCG. "Why not SCG? Do you think we will not play in the quarterfinals?" questioned Tamim with a wry smile. "I don't know why but I am sensing a win against Sri Lanka."

It seems that the win against Afghanistan has given the Tigers a shot in the arms.

Khaleda yet to decide on going to Shaheed Minar tomorrow

Ponders on relaxing blockade

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia is undecided about going to the Central Shaheed Minar tomorrow to offer floral tribute to the language martyrs on the International Mother Language Day.

A BNP insider close to Khaleda told The Daily Star that this year she might not visit the monument on the occasion of February 21 for the first time in her political career.

However, BNP Chairperson's Press Secretary Maruf Kamal Khan Sohel last night said the BNP chief was yet to inform them whether she would go.

"We asked her [Khaleda] about her decision and she said she would inform us later," he said.

BNP Joint Secretary General Salahuddin Ahmed in a press release yesterday said like previous years the party men would pay tribute to the martyred language heroes by placing wreaths.

He urged the leaders and activists of the BNP and its associate bodies to

gather in front of Balaka Cinema Hall at dawn tomorrow and then march towards the Central Shaheed Minar.

Yesterday's press release did not mention anything about Khaleda's visit there.

An insider close to Khaleda said a BNP delegation would go to the Central Shaheed Minar with party activists to pay tribute to the language martyrs on her behalf.

BNP sources said the party chief would not go to the monument this year as she and other BNP leaders fear that the government might not allow them to return to the office where they have been staying in since January 3.

Another party source yesterday told The Daily Star that even though there was "pressure" on Khaleda to relax the ongoing blockade for 24 hours from tomorrow, she was yet to decide to this end.

"There is a discussion among the BNP high ups to relax the blockade for 24 hours from 6:00am Friday. But Khaleda did not say anything about this," a senior BNP leader said.

Govt to tackle

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According to some lawyers, however, such cases are very small in number.

The Anti Terrorism Act 2009 says, "The Government may, by notification in the official Gazette, constitute one or more Anti-terrorism Special Tribunals for speedy and effective trial of the offences committed under this Act".

The minister said the delegation of the European Parliament wanted to know about the human rights situation of the country, a follow-up of victims of Rana Plaza disaster and also about the government's plan to appoint an ombudsman.

"I have told them that human rights and the rule of law are protected in the country and the families of all the victims of Rana Plaza collapse have been given financial and other helps by the government," he said, adding that the government also has a plan to appoint an ombudsman.

The minister, however, could not say anything about the number of cases filed under the Anti Terrorism Act 2009 and about the present status of investigation into those cases.

He said the cases relating to political violence were filed under the Special Powers Act 1974, the Explosive Substances Act 1908, the Penal Code and the Anti Terrorism Act 2009.

Some lawyers dealing with such cases against high-profile BNP leaders told The Daily Star that very few cases of political violence had been filed under the Anti Terrorism Act 2009.

Most of the cases have rather been filed under the Special Powers Act 1974, the Explosive Substances Act 1908 and the Penal Code. Many of these cases have been filed in 2013 since when political violence started, advocate Sagir Hossain Leon told this correspondent.

He said he was dealing with cases against around one hundred BNP leaders including its acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir. But he saw only one case that was filed against Fakhrul and some others under the Anti Terrorism Act 2009 after police had been attacked at Bangla Motor in the capital in 2013.

He also said the anti-terrorism special tribunals would not get sufficient cases or trial if they were established.

Our district correspondents concerned contributed to the report.

Stop violence, resolve crisis

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expression is a fundamental pillar of a pluralistic and vibrant democracy."

The members underlined the need for consolidating democratic institutions and reiterated their expectations that the draft Foreign Donations Act should guarantee adequate space for civil society organisations to continue working for the betterment of the vulnerable populations.

"This is also critical for the smooth implementation of EU funded development projects," the statement said.

The delegation also expressed concerns over enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

Cristian Dan Preda, the delegation chair, said: "We were here because of our concerns regarding the human rights situation. We need Bangladesh as a strong partner."

He said the respect for human rights and democracy would be an essential component for Bangladesh to realise its full potential to reach its declared goal of becoming a middle-income country by 2021.

The two other delegation members are Josef Weidenholzer and Karol Karski. The team arrived in Dhaka on February 16 and is due to depart

today.

The purpose of the visit was to assess the current human rights situation in the country, focusing on labour rights and children, women and minority rights, said the statement.

The European Parliament considers human rights and democracy an essential element of the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and the EU, in accordance with article 1 of the 2001 Cooperation Agreement, it added.

The delegation met the Speaker, members of the government, trade union and business leaders, environmental activists, representatives of local and international civil society, members of minority groups and senior political leaders.

They visited a garment factory in Dhaka and exchanged views with Accord representatives, trade unions and industry stakeholders to gain insight into the implementation of the Sustainability Compact and to assess labour conditions.

The team welcomed the progress achieved through inspections and consultations, and called for further support to the Accord, and working

towards a supportive environment to ensure effective rights to collective bargaining and the full implementation of the amended Labour Law, including in the export processing zones.

The delegation also made a field visit to Mirpur to see a school and a project linked to children's migration to urban areas financed by the EU and run by Save the Children, an NGO.

It hailed government efforts and progress achieved in basic education of children, and encouraged further measures such as nationwide birth registration and protection of the particularly vulnerable groups, especially in large urban areas.

The members also discussed women and children's rights and urged the government to ensure the full implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord.

They hoped the government would continue engaging with the international community towards improving the situation of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh.

At different meetings, the EP members reiterated the EU's principled position on the death penalty, opposing it under all circumstances.

'This is very special'

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Language Movement of 1952.

Diplomatic sources in New Delhi and Dhaka said Mamata came to Bangladesh with a "compromise formula" to get a breakthrough in the Teesta river pact.

In her meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina tomorrow, Mamata might suggest the formula to work out the amount of Teesta water to be shared.

If Bangladesh accepted Mamata's proposal, the path for formalisation of the agreements and their implementation would be cleared before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Dhaka.

Modi's visit could be in March, diplomatic sources said.

Raising hopes for Teesta deal, Trinamool Congress lawmaker Prof Sugata Bose, in Kolkata, said, "Even

though, I do not want to prejudge things, but from my understanding, it seems that the Teesta water sharing issue would be discussed between the chief minister and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

"We are expecting a positive development in this regard. Noted river expert Kalyan Rudra is now looking after the technicalities of the water sharing."

Prior to departing Kolkata, Mamata, however, declined to comment on the contentious Teesta river pact but was optimistic of a solution to the land boundary accord issue.

"The relation between the two countries is cordial. I will try to act as a bridge in bettering the relation," she said.