Charities stop funding UK rights group linked to 'Jihadi John'

AFP, *London*

Two charities have stopped funding a rights group in contact with the man thought to be Islamic State group executioner "Jihadi John" before he left for Syria, Britain's charities regulator has said.

Rights group Cage describes its work as supporting people arrested or raided as a result of the "war on terror" following the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

It worked with Mohammed Emwazi for over two years and, when he was identified by the Washington Post as "Jihadi John" last month, its research director Asim Qureshi described him as a "beautiful young man" and blamed British intelligence for radicalising him.

Islamists

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loss of faith in democratic institutions with increasing success," says Verisk Maplecroft in its report released yesterday.

The report says political crisis is set to escalate in the coming months, which will hurt the country's business.

"Bangladesh's dysfunctional politics will weigh heavily on the country's business environment in 2015," it says.

There is little scope for a peaceful resolution of the crisis in the coming months unless the government stops or delays legal proceedings against BNP chief Khaleda Zia whose putative arrest will almost certainly trigger another intense round of violent unrest by BNP supporters across the country, the report observes.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will not accept the BNP's key demand to step down as "the AL maintains that the BNP forfeited its chance to participate in the political process by boycotting the elections."

"The only conceivable trigger for reducing political tensions and levels of unrest is for the government to curb its zeal to prosecute Zia."

The report says that in addition to "personality clashes", the ideological differences over political Islam will limit the scope for political reconciliation even in the long term.

International pressure on Bangladesh is not likely to play any important role in reducing tensions and even if the crisis deepens the army is unlikely to intervene, mentions the report.

It also points out that "Bangladesh's instability is causing concern among its neighbours as well as donor nations, all of whom have urged the various stakeholders to resolve their differences peacefully."

According to the report, transport blockades are, in particular, likely to continue for the foreseeable future, along with associated risks of violence.

"Disruptive BNP-led protests pose substantial risks to commercial activity and supply chains, particularly in Dhaka and Chittagong. BNP and Jamaat -led protests and hartals can cause severe disruptions to traffic and commercial activity."

It also warns that security forces may use force to break up demonstrations, posing high human security risks.

"Bangladeshi security forces have been accused by multiple human rights organisations of using excessive force to maintain law and order," it says.

Manna

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Firoz Kabir, officer-in-charge of Gulshan Police Station and also investigation officer of the sedition case, yesterday produced Manna before the court and sought a 10-day remand.

The case was filed against Manna and BNP leader Sadeque Hossain Khoka with Gulshan Police Station on March 5.

During yesterday's hearing, Manna told the court that both the cases against him were filed under different acts but contained same allegations.

He alleged that his relatives were not allowed to meet him during the last 10-day remand.

Manna claimed that the sedition charges against him were false, and that the cases were filed only to harass him.

Claiming that he was sick, Manna demanded that he be granted bail. Manna's lawyer Advocate Mannan Khan also filed a bail petition yesterday.

Following the hearing, the court rejected the bail petition and granted the 10-day remand prayer.

Manna was arrested on February 24, a day after the leak of his controversial telephone conversation with Khoka, now in the USA for treatment. The next day Manna was placed on a 10-day remand.

In the conversation, Manna, also a former organising secretary of the Awami League, was heard talking to Khoka about strengthening the anti-government movement, among other issues.

Syrian warplanes kill leaders of al Qaeda affiliate: source

CNN ONLINE

As many as 13 senior leaders of al-Nusra Front, including the terror group's military commander, were killed in two Syrian airstrikes Thursday, a Middle Eastern security source who was briefed by Syrian intelligence told CNN.

Abu Hammam al Shami was among those killed in the strikes against al-Nusra, al Qaeda's largest affiliate in Syria, the source said. Syria's state news agency SANA also reported al Shami's death.

The special operation that took place in Hobait, in Idlib province, was part of a wider effort by Syrian forces to destroy areas believed to be gathering points for al-Nusra militants around the province, according to SANA.

According to a 2014 al-Nusra video, al Shami joined the group after years of training in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Also killed in the northwestern province of Idlib was a senior Saudi operative in the group, the source said.

There were initial indications that al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al Jolani was wounded in one of the strikes, the source said Thursday. But on Friday, the source told CNN the latest assessment of Syrian intelligence was that al Jolani was not injured.

The strikes took place in the towns of Salqin and Hobait, both near the city of Saraqeb in Idlib. One strike targeted a meeting of senior al-Nusra Front leaders; the other was on a home being used as a base, the source said.

A spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition that is hitting ISIS targets in Syria said its planes weren't involved.

"Within the last 24 hours, we have not conducted any airstrikes within 200 miles of the province of Idlib," the spokesman said earlier Thursday.

IMPORTANT FIGURE

Al Shami was featured in a March 2014 video released by al-Nusra Front, in which he discussed his failed attempt to mediate between his militants and ISIS after rising tensions between the groups.

The video included a biography by the group of al Shami, which was translated by the Long War Journal.

It mustn't be 16

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was set following proper analysis of different aspects and scientific scrutiny.

"It [new act] will be counterproductive," Sultana Kamal, executive director of rights body Ain O Salish Kendra, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Expressing her disappointment over the move, Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation, told this newspaper that the act would rather encourage child marriage.

"If it [new act] is implemented, parents will forcibly marry off girls without taking their consent. In many cases, parents may marry off girls at the age of 14. We are expressing our concern and protest," she said.

However, State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Meher Afroz Chumki told this correspondent that the new act would specify the circumstances under which the provision of relaxation would be applicable.

The ministry prepared a draft of Child Marriage Restraint Act-2014 and sent it to the law ministry for vetting with the prime minister's advice.

The move drew huge criticism at home and abroad with a number of national and international rights bodies asking the government not to lower the marriageable age for girls.

According to the latest report of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the rate of child marriage in Bangladesh is around 66 percent.

NHRC Chairman Prof Mizanur Rahman at a programme in the capital said, "On behalf of the National Human Rights Commission, we earlier informed the government in writing that anything that allows girls to be married off before 18 is not acceptable to us."

Salma Ali, executive director of Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers' Association (BNWLA), said, "This [the draft act] is not acceptable at all. We will not accept it."

She said the government was trying to lower the marriageable age to show the international community that Bangladesh the percentage of child marriage is low, which was "actually an eyewash".

The act will also contradict several laws and international conventions which consider someone below 18 as a child and to which Bangladesh is a signatory, she pointed out.

Meher Afroz Chumki said the new act was going to incorporate the specific provision, considering the real social perspective and to make the act feasible.

She also said as there would be specific conditions where the provision of relaxation would be applicable, the act would not encourage child marriage.

"The Law Ministry is still working on it. We will consider everything before finalising it," she said, adding it might take three or four months to finalise it.

Peace recipe

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In his keynote paper, Prof Emeritus Zillur Rahman Khan of the University of Wisconsin, USA, proposed proportional representation in parliament where allocation of parliamentary seats would reflect the percentage of votes earned by contesting political parties in the general election.

He suggested that the parliament have two houses, with one checking any excesses of the other. Considering the size of Bangladesh's population, he suggested increasing the parliamentary seats to 500 in the lower house and 100 in his proposed upper house.

Zillur Rahman, also chairman, RC 37, International Political Science Association, floated the idea of holding the next general elections under an elected interim government composed of elected leaders from two largest parties with their top leaders serving as co-chairs.

Akbar Ali Khan, former adviser to a caretaker government, said elections under the present arrangements were unlikely to be fair, with election officials getting involved in corruption.

He supported Prof Zillur's idea of proportional representation in parliament and a bicameral legislature.

"The political parties are very divisive and exchange rebukes. If the parliament is representational, there will be exchanges between them," Akbar Ali Khan said.

He also suggested enhancing the power of the president, and referendum on nationally important issues.

"President's power in our country is less than that of a section officer. A section officer can write a note against a government policy and his or her higher officials can correct it. But, there is no provision in the constitution for the president to have a different opinion," he said.

Former chief election commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda said under the present system, a political party might have brute majority in parliament by having marginally higher votes, which was quite unacceptable.

Such anomalies could be avoided by proportional representation system, Huda said, stressing on reforms to the Election Commission, Public Service Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, the judiciary, police and bureaucracy to institutionalise democratic values.

BNP Chairperson's Adviser Enam Ahmed Chowdhury said a dialogue between the government and the opposition political parties was a necessity to find solutions to the present political problem.

"Repression on the opposition cannot bring any solution," he said.

Economist M Syeduzzaman suggested stronger local government system and establishing Ombudsman to hold accountable the bureaucracy and the police.

Bangladesh Bank's former governor Farashuddin observed that the reforms could not be made overnight and that fixing the existing system first would be wise. Gradual and needful reforms could be made, he said.

Political scientist Prof Rounaq Jahan said there are many good laws in Bangladesh but those are not being implemented.

Before considering the issues of referendum and sharing of power between the president and the prime minister, it was important to investigate the factors behind the culture of impunity, she said.

She also said she was worried over the political future of Bangladesh, especially since the present generation thinks this situation to be normal.

Political science professor Ataur Rahman of Dhaka University noted that Bangladesh would become a conflicted society if the major political parties kept on locking horns the way they were doing.

PRI Executive Director Ahsan H Mansur, Shujan Secretary Badiul Alam Majumder, former commerce secretary Sohel Chowdhury, daily Ittefaq acting editor Tasmima Hossain also spoke at the discussion moderated by Brac University Pro Emeritus Manzoor Ahmed.

A Bangla book "The Third World Charismat: Shiekh Mujib and Struggle for Freedom" by Prof Zillur was also unveiled after the programme.

Iran's role worries anti-ISIS coalition: US general

AFP, *Aboard A Us Military Aircraft*

The US military's top officer said Friday Iran is bolstering the firepower of Shiite militias in Iraq but it remains unclear if Tehran is a help or a hindrance to the fight against Islamic State jihadists.

General Martin Dempsey, speaking to reporters aboard his plane en route to Bahrain and Iraq, said he would raise his concerns about Iran's influence in talks with Iraq's leaders --- days after Baghdad launched a large-scale operation to recapture Tikrit from the Islamic State group.

The Shiite militias, armed and advised by Iran, are playing a major role in the Tikrit offensive.

But the US-led coalition -- which has no dealings with the Shiite fighters -- has been markedly absent from the operation and allies fear Iran's activity could aggravate sectarian tensions.

Dempsey said US-led air strikes in recent months to the north near Baiji had put pressure on the ISIS extremists, laying the ground for the offensive on Tikrit.

"The Tikrit operation is only possible because of the air campaign we've been running around Baiji," where the ISIS was pushed away from oil refineries, Dempsey said.

"I want to make sure the prime minister and the minister of defense understand that and don't think this is all happening, you know, magically by the emergence of the Shia militia on the road . . . that runs from Baghdad to Tikrit," he said.

Referring to Iran's support for Shiite fighters, Dempsey said he is "trying to get a sense for how our activities and their activities are complementary."

He said that "we're alert to the challenges of having Iran supporting Shia militia," and Tehran's influence had sparked concerns in the anti-ISIS coalition, which includes Sunni Arab countries that view Iran as a threat.

It was not clear if Iran shared the same strategic goals as the Washington-led coalition, he said.

We pleaded

FROM PAGE 5

Tanwir Muhammed Taqi, an A-level graduate, was found dead on the bank of the river Shitalakkhya in Narayanganj on March 8, 2013, two days after he had gone missing.

Tigers ready

FROM PAGE 16

Thirimanne had quite a bit of fun as they cruised past the England's 300-plus score in a jiffy.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, have managed to chase down a 300-plus target, something that they don't do often, against the tide. It was a win that would definitely expand the boundaries of their expectation levels. Despite not being able to reach a significant landmark, all of their top six batsmen have now been among the runs in the World Cup and that should immensely boost their confidence levels.

The only problem they have to solve right now is their combination. Will they continue with an eight-man batting line-up or will the team management take the risk and include a spinner in place of a batsman?

Anamul Haque's injury in the last game has opened up a spot in the team. Mominul Haque, Imrul Kayes, Arafat Sunny and Taijul Islam are in contention for that place.

Traditionally Bangladesh's slow left-armers have enjoyed bowling against the English. In the two World Cup meetings, they have taken eight out of the 16 English wickets that fell. However, those two matches took place in Barbados and Chittagong and the conditions in Adelaide are expected to be different.

Of the 1006 wickets taken by bowlers at the Adelaide Oval, 758 belong to pace bowlers. The Tigers don't have too many options though. If they don't pick either Arafat or Taijul, they will have to depend on Mahmudullah Riyad, Sabbir Rahman and Nasir Hossain, all of who are part-timers and remain unpredictable. In addition, Taskin Ahmed and Rubel Hossain haven't been in the best of forms in the last two matches.

The two teams don't meet that often. The last time they faced off was in Chittagong back in the 2011 World Cup. It was a match that a majority of the fans would remember as if it was played just yesterday. Shafiul Islam's heroic 24 at number nine, which led to a sensational turnaround, has been etched in the history books. However, the odds, as always, have been stacked up against the Tigers. And the reason behind that is England's 13 wins out of 15.

However, as the Tigers head towards their first ever game at the historic venue tomorrow, every Bangladesh fan would hope for yet another historic win; one which would seal the quarterfinal deal for the Tigers, unlike their last victory in 2011, which only turned out to be a consolation.

'Earth-like planet exists'

FROM PAGE 16

heralded in 2007 but new research last year cast doubt on the claims, saying data used to find it was probably just misinterpreted signals from stars.

Astronomers had used a spectrometer to spot the planet, which measures "wobbles" in the wavelength of light emitted by a star caused as a planet orbits it.

GJ 581d was said to be a super-Earth with a mass seven times that of our own planet orbiting a red dwarf star that could also support up to four other planets.

It was believed to be in the habitable "Goldilocks zone" in its solar system, where it is neither too hot nor too cold for liquid water to exist and support life on the surface.

Researchers revisiting the evidence claimed the body was actually just "stellar activity masquerading as planets" and its existence was widely dismissed without further questioning.

But now astronomers from Queen Mary University, in London, and the University of Hertfordshire have claimed the statistical techniques used to discount GJ 581d is "inadequate" for planets of its small size.

Dr Guillem Anglada-Escudé, lead author of the paper published in Science, said: "The existence (or not) of GJ 581d is significant because it was the first Earth-like planet discovered in the 'Goldilocks'-zone around another star and it is a benchmark case for the Doppler technique.

"There are always discussions among scientists about the ways we interpret data but I'm confident that GJ 581d has been in orbit around (its star) Gliese 581 all along."

She said the method worked for identifying larger planets in the past because their effect on the star was so significant it outweighed errors in the findings.

However, she argued that the technique makes it almost impossible to find the smallest planet signals close to or within the noise caused by the stellar own variability.

If GJ 581d does exist, it could be of the most Earth-like planets yet discovered as ranked by the Earth Similarity Index but that does not mean its surface is the same.

Some studies have suggested Gliese 581d's denser air and dim red light from its host star would make for a murky environment that would be toxic to humans.

The Index incorporates a number of factors including surface temperature and planet density to rank extrasolar planets in a scale from 0 to 1. The most Earth-like planet yet confirmed is Gliese 581g, orbiting the same star, which ranks at 0.89.

For astronomers, the most exciting aspect is its relative proximity – 20 light years away in a galaxy that is 100,000 light years wide.

Robin Wordsworth, who researched Gliese 581d with the Institut Pierre Simon Laplace in Paris, said: "The Gliese system is particularly exciting to us as it's very close to Earth, relatively speaking. So with future generations of telescopes, we'll be able to search for life on Gliese 581d directly."

Nepal trip ends

FROM PAGE 16

stamped by officials, we crossed the immigration within minutes. It was a hassle-free process since you don't need any visa to go to Nepal.

We had some time to pass. We took tea, went to the duty free shops and were very pleased to see the unusually clean and stink-free toilets.

Around 10:30am, we looked at the flight information display and found that the Biman flight would be delayed by an hour.

"You see, this is why I never trust Biman. They would always be late," said Towhid.

I argued with him. I went to Kolkata last year on a Biman flight which had taken off 15 minutes ahead of the schedule and touched down in Kolkata accordingly. And I had the same experience on the return flight.

We went back to have some snacks. Around noon, it seemed that the flight would be delayed further. The flight information display now updates the flight status to "Delayed", but there is no mention of any probable take off. Even the Biman authorities would not make any announcement about the reason for the delay.

As I am set to return home on Friday, wasting time at Dhaka airport means I would miss out on something in Kathmandu. I thought we need to look for a Biman official to know what went wrong with the flight.

But once you cross the immigration channel, you won't find any Biman booth. Towhid then phoned his travel agent.

"What?" his voice worried me.

Hanging up his phone, Towhid dropped the bombshell. "A Turkish airliner has crash-landed at Kathmandu airport. Flight operations at the airport have been suspended until the Nepalese army clears the runway."

I went on the internet on my phone and saw the photograph and news of the Turkish airliner tilted on a grass airstrip at the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu.

"So what do we do now? When will the airport be reopened?" I asked Towhid who called up the travel agent again. He was told that the Nepal authorities were hoping to reopen the airport after 5:00pm.

We were getting very bored with the delay when an announcement was made asking the Kathmandu-bound Biman passengers to have complementary lunch at the Spice restaurant.

As we sat for lunch with other passengers, we realised that the others had no idea about the accident in Kathmandu. Towhid has already been informed by the organiser World Bank that the regional conference might be cancelled as all flights, except for the one of Biman, to Kathmandu have been cancelled for the day. None of the participants of the conference from outside Kathmandu could land there.

The organisers offered apologies for the cancellation of the programme. "So it's time to go home," Towhid said.

We never had such an experience of cancelling a trip after crossing the Immigration. So what's the process? One immigration police told us to go to the Arrival section. But before going there, Towhid needs to collect his luggage. We consulted yet another policeman who told us to go to Immigration high ups.

We met the immigration boss, a real gentleman, who asked us to fill in a form and submit it along with the passport. We sat in his room, chatting and rediscovering our log lost social connections. An hour passed by. The immigration chief was busy with his official works that included deporting illegal foreign nationals.

I could overhear two officers discussing the story of one such illegal foreign national. He is a Tanzanian sailor who had jumped from his ship in Chittagong around 11 years ago. He was put behind bars eight years ago for travelling without any document. The immigration department contacted his relatives in Tanzania to send him some documents. Now he is being deported.

I did not notice when this tall and timid Tanzanian entered the room and sat on a sofa close to me. I looked at him when he was talking in Bangla to an immigration officer. I could not help feeling bad that this man in his late thirties has lost eight invaluable years of his life behind bars in Bangladesh.

After an hour, I received my passport from the immigration. I was ready to go home, but I wanted to talk to this man. "Why did you decide to jump from the ship?" I asked him quickly.

"It was Allah's wish," he replied.

"Had you been so poor in Tanzania that you decided to work in Chittagong?"

"We are poor. I've not seen my family for years. Today I am going back home," said the deportee. As he walked out of the room, I was taken aback by the sight that he was limping. He had problems in his right leg.

We then crossed the Arrival immigration and as suggested by officials, went to belt number 5 to collect the luggage. But there was nothing in that belt. So we contacted a help desk and were told that we need to go to the Lost and Found department.

A staff of the Lost and Found section took us to belt 5 again. We stood there, saw the help going to the other side of the belt and finding Towhid's luggage in a minute.

We finally came out of the airport at 4:00pm. I did not bother finding out if the Biman flight left for Kathmandu that day. For me, the national carrier is a shy host. Its guests have to know the fate of their journey on their own.

Family of schoolgirls who fled UK for Syria criticise police

AFP, *London*

The families of three schoolgirls who ran away from their homes in London to Syria have voiced anger at police, saying they did not warn them the teenagers risked being radicalised.

School friends Kadiza Sultana, 16, and 15-year-olds Shamima Begum and Amira Abase left their homes and flew to Istanbul, from where they are believed to have joined Islamic State group jihadists in Syria.

All three were spoken to in December by police investigating the disappearance of another friend who went to Syria.

But their families say they were in the dark about this after the girls hid a courtesy letter that police had given them to pass on to their parents, in which they asked for permission to speak to the teenagers.

The relatives say police should have given the letter directly to the families and that, had they been aware of the situation, they could have taken action.

Amira's father Abase Hussein told ITV television Friday that he could have prevented his daughter from travelling if he had been aware.