



Boats of Acehne fishermen, left, tow a boat of Rohingya migrants off the coast near Geulumpang of Indonesia's East Aceh before being rescued yesterday. Acehne fishermen, top, help transfer Rohingya migrants from their boat. Rohingya migrants, top right, on a boat near Aceh. The empty cargo hold of an abandoned boat, right bottom, that carried Rohingya migrants rescued earlier yesterday. Some of the migrants had been on boats for four months.



PHOTO: AFP

CITY ELECTIONS

Cops too see no assault on journos

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Like the presiding officers, police personnel noticed no assaults on journalists on the Dhaka city corporations polls day, although such incidents at 30 centres were reported by different media outlets.

Twenty policemen, who were on-duty at the centres, made their submission before a probe committee headed by Anisur Rahman, an additional divisional commissioner of Dhaka, during a hearing on the incident yesterday.

Of them, eight are officers-in-charge and the rest sub-inspectors at different police stations, an official, who attended the hearing, told The Daily Star.

On Sunday, the presiding officers said they were not aware of any assault on journalists during the voting on April 28.

At least 10 journalists were assaulted by ruling Awami League men during the polling hours. Some reporters were robbed of cash, mobile phones and handbags, according to media reports.

On May 5, the Election Commission formed the committee to probe the incidents.

Correction

In the news report headlined "Bangladesh's state-run telecom firm BTCL to lose \$25m Japanese soft loan" published in The Daily Star on Wednesday, we mistakenly named Abu Sayed Khan as the BTCL managing director. The current BTCL managing director (in-charge) is Mahfuz Uddin Ahmed. We regret the error.

TORTURE OF STUDENT

3 madrasa teachers sacked

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

The authorities of Nurani Talimul Quran Hafizia Madrasa in Dinajpur yesterday sacked three teachers for their "direct" involvement in torturing a nine-year-old student.

The sacked teachers are Rezaul Islam, Riazul Islam and Shariful Islam.

Two other teachers -- Golam Mostafa and Sazzadur Rahman -- were also suspended for their negligence in duty.

Mazedur Rahman, president of the managing committee of the madrasa, yesterday announced the decision following a report of a five-member madrasa probe team formed on Monday.

Mazedur said the committee had found evidence against the three teachers of their "direct" involvement in torturing Abu Sayeed, a class-II student at the madrasa.

Dinajpur Sadar Police Station Officer-in-Charge ATM Khalekuzzaman told The Daily Star that the three teachers were sent to jail through a local court yesterday. The trio were arrested on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, victim's father Hasan Ali on Tuesday night filed a case with the same police station accusing the three teachers.

Levelling charges of theft against Sayeed, the trio caught the boy on Friday afternoon and tortured him brutally inside a room of the madrasa for three days.

On information, the victim's family with the help of locals rescued the boy on Monday night and took him to Dinajpur Medical College Hospital.

Expressing satisfaction over the rapid action taken by the police and the madrasa committee, the victim's father said, "Now I want justice."

No more pushback

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2:00am local time and then taken to a village, Khairul Nova, an official of Indonesia's search and rescue agency, told AFP.

The second batch was found in a boat about 65 kilometres off the coast and were brought to a port in the Julok area of East Aceh district a few hours later, said Indonesian official Sadikin.

"They found the boat bobbing about, the engine was dead, the fishermen felt pity for them," he told AFP.

"Some looked very sick and weak, some looked dehydrated, there seems to be a lack of water and food at sea," he said.

"We are giving first aid to these people, we are feeding them, giving them water and providing a comfortable place for them," said Sadikin.

Teuku Nyak Idrus, a local fisherman involved in the rescue, said, "Many are sick, they told me that some of their friends died from starvation."

Those saved in the Malacca Strait between Malaysia and Indonesia's huge

Sumatra island included 30 children and 26 women, he added.

Sirajul Islam, a Rohingya Muslim who was among the migrants brought to shore in Aceh province yesterday, said their ship's engine broke down in the Thai waters off Koh Lipe on May 14. The Thai navy repaired the engine and provided food and drinks, reports AP.

The navy then pushed the boat away "within 10 minutes, otherwise they would shoot our ship," he said.

TRIPARTITE MEETING

After holding talks with his Indonesian and Thai counterparts in Putrajaya, Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman said Malaysia and Indonesia would no longer turn away migrant vessels.

"They would take in the boatpeople provided that they could be resettled or repatriated within a year, he said.

"The towing and the shoeing [away of boats] are not going to happen," Aman said at a joint press conference with his Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi after the talks.

"We also agreed to offer them temporary shelter provided that the resettlement and repatriation process will be done in one year by the international community," he said.

The offer of shelter is applicable only to those now on the seas, he added.

Aman and Marsudi recommended convening an emergency meeting of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), which Malaysia currently chairs. Myanmar is also a member.

Meantime, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said the announcement from the two Southeast Asian countries was "an important initial step in the search for solutions to this issue, and vital for the purpose of saving lives".

In a statement, it called for migrants to be brought ashore "without delay" and for countries in the region to address the "root causes" of the large-scale migration.

Yesterday's tripartite meeting was also attended by Thai Foreign Minister

Tanasak Patimapragom but he was not present at the press conference.

Aman said the Thai side refrained from joining in the offer, saying it had to first refer back to whether the move would be allowed by "domestic laws" in Thailand.

However, BBC reported that though Thailand earlier didn't join its neighbours in their commitment to shelter the migrants, the country later said it too would not push back boats stranded in its territorial waters.

And the country will continue to provide humanitarian assistance.

YANGON CHANGES TONE

Quoting a foreign ministry statement, Myanmar state media yesterday said the government "shares concerns" expressed by the international community, and is "ready to provide humanitarian assistance to anyone who suffered in the sea".

Reversing its earlier stance of not attending the May 29 meeting on the issue in Bangkok, Myanmar's Deputy Foreign Minister Thant Kyaw said, "We all

have to sit down and we all have to consider how to tackle this problem."

Meanwhile, US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he would push Myanmar to improve conditions for Rohingya when he visits the country today.

During a stop in Jakarta yesterday, he said, "The only sustainable solution to the problem is changing the conditions that led [Rohingya people] to put their lives at risk in the first place, and that is one of the things that we will be talking about tomorrow with the government of Myanmar."

POPE CHIMES IN

Pope Francis also issued his first comments on the issue on Tuesday, likening the plight of the "poor Rohingya" to that of Christian and ethnic Yazidi people brutalised by the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq.

"We think of the poor Rohingya of Myanmar. As they leave their land to escape persecution, they do not know what will happen to them," he said in a mass at the Vatican.

Rescue comes after 4-month ordeal at sea

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fleeing persecution in their native Myanmar, which is predominantly Buddhist. "Looking at these people, me and my friends cried because they looked so hungry, so skinny."

The fisherman from staunchly Islamic Aceh province, where there has been an outpouring of sympathy as Rohingya and Bangladeshis have come ashore in recent days, said that he also felt compelled to help due to their shared religion.

"We must help fellow Muslims, how can we not help destitute people like this? It would be a big sin," he said.

The wooden green boat had drawn global attention after harrowing scenes emerged of the migrants pleading for help off Thailand last week. They were rescued by fishermen early yesterday

and brought to shore.

For the migrants, who had not been heard from for over three days, the rescue marked the end of a harrowing, four-month journey.

The Rohingya, who included 140 women and children, were "totally exhausted" after being repeatedly towed out of Thai waters and then forced at gunpoint to leave Malaysian waters, said Chris Lewa, whose Arakan Project monitors migrant journeys across the Bay of Bengal.

"The worst were the Malaysians who pushed them out twice. They said the second time the Malaysians came with guns and said they'd shoot at the boat if they came back again," said Lewa, whose researchers had talked to two of the migrants.

It is the latest grim tale to emerge from the region's migrant crisis, which has seen thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshis arrive in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia in recent days after being abandoned after a Thai crackdown disrupted people smuggling and -trafficking routes.

The three nations have also sparked outrage by turning away seaworthy vessels, although Malaysia and Indonesia relented yesterday and said they would take in migrants provided they could be resettled or repatriated within a year.

MALNOURISHED MIGRANTS

As migrants have made it to shore, often malnourished after months at sea, they have recounted tales of being abused by smugglers and of deadly fights breaking out between rival

groups armed with axes and knives.

The group rescued off Indonesia's Aceh early yesterday, who join another 1,300 Rohingya and Bangladeshis who recently arrived there, suffered the same fate as others, pushed for days between Southeast Asian countries who were unwilling to accept them.

After last week's harrowing scenes drew global attention, the Thai navy reprovisioned the boat and took the vessel out to international waters with authorities insisting the migrants wanted to travel to Malaysia.

The boat lost contact late Saturday, raising fears for the welfare of the hundreds on board.

The trawler was finally spotted late Tuesday by fishermen off the coast of Aceh. The migrants were rescued from

the boat in two batches, with both brought ashore early yesterday.

AFP journalists later reached the boat, after setting off from the port of Geulumpang.

Fisherman Ali described how he heard from others about the stranded boat late Tuesday and arrived to help early yesterday.

"They came close to us, they were shouting, calling for help," he said.

Ali, who transported about 100 of the Rohingya, said the Acehne and migrants could not understand each other but managed to work out they shared the same religion.

"If we said 'Islam', they would answer 'Islam, Muslim'. Those were the only two words that we exchanged," he said.

Mahidur, Afsar jailed till death

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space in Binodpur. Only three of them survived with bullet injuries.

The duo who had committed such horrendous crimes during the Liberation War, however, were spared the gallows as they had already served life term for killing four other people in 1971.

A special tribunal yesterday sentenced them to imprisonment till death.

"The offence proved was of a gravest nature that shakes human conscience, the humanity and civilization. Indeed they deserve the highest sentence i.e. capital punishment," said the tribunal in its verdict.

"However, we consider it just to take the admitted fact into account that the accused persons were convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for life under the Collaborators Order 1972..." it said, explaining why they were spared the gallows.

Justice Obaidul Hassan, chairman of the tribunal, read out the summary of the 133-page judgement: "The accused Mahidur Rahman and Afsar Hossain Chutu participated, abetted and substantially contributed to the accomplishment of killing 24 civilians, the outcome of systematic attack

constituting the offence of 'murder' as crimes against humanity."

"It sufficiently proves the accused persons' involvement in all the phases of the entire event of killing the persons brought forcibly at Binodpur High School on 06 October, 1971," the verdict read.

The International Crimes Tribunal-2 also sentenced Mahidur, 84, and Afsar, 65, to five years' imprisonment by majority for looting and burning down houses in two villages -- Kabirajitola and Eradot Biswasertola -- in Shibganj.

Of the three charges framed against the duo, the three-member tribunal, by majority, dropped the third charge relating to the killing of four people in 1971 because they had already been punished for this crime under the Collaborator Act 1972.

The court unanimously handed them "sentences of imprisonment for life till death" for killing 24 people but was divided over the other two charges. While Justice Hassan and Justice Md Shahinur Islam gave them five years' imprisonment for the second charge, Justice Md Mozibur Rahman Miah acquitted them.

Though Justice Hassan and Justice Islam dropped the third charge, Justice

Mozibur Miah found them not guilty in the charge as the prosecution did not produce any witness in support of the charge.

The tribunal in its verdict said the accused persons belonged to the Razakar force and collaborated with the Pakistan army in committing crimes.

"The criminal events that resulted in murder of numerous civilians and causing mental and physical harm to the civilians were the fragmented portrait of the total horrific attack against the Bengali non-combatant pro-liberation civilians in the territory of Bangladesh in 1971," said the court.

Termining the convicted "small fishes" with no significant profile, the court said, "Letters of law do not consider the level of the offender in awarding sentence. It considers the level and gravity of the offence for which the offender is found guilty."

The court reprimanded investigation officer ZM Altaf Rahman for bringing up the third charge in which the duo had already served imprisonment.

The convicted were taken to the courtroom at 10:47am. Both Mahidur, who wore a golden coloured Panjabi and off-white trouser, and Afsar, clad

in white Panjabi and off-white trouser, seemed to be nonchalant throughout the 17-minute proceeding.

Family members of Mahidur were present during the proceeding, but there was none from Afsar's family.

The prosecution expressed their satisfaction over the verdict. "However, we will decide whether to file an appeal seeking capital punishment after receiving a copy of the verdict," prosecutor Sahidur Rahman said.

The defence expressed dissatisfaction over the judgement and said they would file an appeal against the verdict after getting a copy of the full verdict.

Abdus Sobhan Tarafdar, a defence counsel, said the investigation officer did not carry out proper investigation in the case.

The prosecution or the defence will get 30 days' time from yesterday to file an appeal with Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.

But the victims' family members and freedom fighters in Shibganj upazila were unhappy with the verdict as it did not live up to their expectations.

They said they hoped the duo would get capital punishment.

"My brother and two nephews were

picked up from our house and were brutally killed. We have been waiting for justice for over four decades, but our expectations have not been fulfilled," said Nasoria Badsha of Chandshikari village.

People of Binodpur union brought out a procession in Khaserhat area expressing dissatisfaction over the verdict after learning about the verdict from media, reports our Chapainawabganj correspondent.

Son of Subedar Ali Biswas of Dadanchak in Shibganj, Mahidur was involved in the politics of Muslim League prior to 1971 and joined the Peace Committee and Razakar force during the war.

Afsar, 65, son of Kutub Uddin Morol of Satrosia of Shibganj, had also been an activist of Muslim League and joined the Peace Committee and Razakar force.

They were arrested in a criminal case on September 16 last year. Later, they were shown arrested in the war crimes case on November 24 and the tribunal framed three charges against them on December 11.

With Mahidur and Afsar, the two tribunals so far convicted 20 people in 18 cases for the crimes they committed during the nine-month-long war.

India coming in full strength

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road since last October would be rested.

This is good news for spectators and fans alike and the mood in the Tigers camp was that they were least bothered about the cast and characters of their latest opponent. Rather they were more focused on confronting perhaps their biggest challenge after a more than impressive home series against Pakistan.

The last time India toured Bangladesh was in June last year, when an under

strength visiting side won the ODI series 2-0. The other game was washed out.

Meanwhile, PTI adds: Sidelined for more than two years, off-spinner Harbhajan Singh on Wednesday returned to India's Test squad for the cricket tour of Bangladesh.

The five-member selection panel headed by Sandeep Patil decided to go with full strength squads for both the one off Test and the three ODIs.

An injured knee has forced pacer Mohammed Shami out of the tour and

the selectors have picked medium pacer Dhawal Kulkarni to replace him in the ODI squad. Kulkarni has played only four ODIs so far and has taken 8 wickets.

Harbhajan's inclusion was the lone surprise in the Test side.

"Harbhajan has been discussed earlier as well. The selection committee has picked Harbhajan due to the strength of Bangladesh batting especially the number of left-handers they have. It was decided that Harbhajan should be there

for these reasons. Captain Virat Kohli's opinion was also taken on this," Patil told reporters after the meeting that lasted little over an hour.

Harbhajan last played a Test for India in March 2013 against Australia in a home series. The 34-year-old is the third highest Test wicket-taker for India with 413 scalps to his credit in 101 matches.

SQUADS

Test: Virat Kohli (capt), Murali Vijay, Shikhar Dhawan, Lokesh Rahul, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane,

Rohit Sharma, Wriddhiman Saha, Ravichandran Ashwin, Harbhajan Singh, Karn Sharma, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Umesh Yadav, Varun Aaron, Ishant Sharma.

ODI: Mahendra Singh Dhoni (capt), Rohit Sharma, Ajinkya Rahane, Shikhar Dhawan, Virat Kohli, Suresh Raina, Ambati Rayudu, Ravichandran Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Umesh Yadav, Mohit Sharma, Stuart Binny, Dhawal Kulkarni.