

Belarus president frees 6 jailed opponents before vote

AFP, Minsk

Belarus strongman Alexander Lukashenko has released six opposition leaders, including a former presidential rival, less than two months before presidential elections in a move hailed by the European Union yesterday.

A pardon for the six was revealed in a brief statement on Saturday evening. Among the freed opponents was Mikola Statkevich, a former presidential candidate imprisoned since 2010, much of which he spent in solitary confinement.

The release was welcomed by European officials, who said it was a long-overdue step towards normalising relations following years of sanctions over Lukashenko's political crackdown.

On his release, a smiling Statkevich was given a hero's welcome with flowers and balloons by around 200 people in Minsk.

He and the five others were considered by international rights groups as the last political prisoners in the country.

"I will continue to do what I have always done: work for a free Belarus," Statkevich told the jubilant crowd as he embraced his wife and was even lifted into the air by supporters, some of whom shouted: "Mikola is our president!"

"I will not leave Belarus under any circumstances. I will fight for creating a normal country," he said.

"Together we will make this country normal and free."

The surprise move to pardon and

release the six detainees in a decree that based the decision on "humane principles" comes as Lukashenko, in power since 1994, seeks reelection for a fifth term in an October 11 election.

Their release took place a day after registration closed for potential candidates.

But the move was hailed in Europe with EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini calling it a "long-sought step forward" in a joint statement with EU enlargement commissioner Johannes Hahn.

The releases "represent important progress in the efforts towards the improvement of relations between the EU and Belarus," it said.

Germany also welcomed the move with a foreign ministry statement describing it as a "positive step" and saying that EU states would have to "consider how a greater rapprochement can take place" with Belarus.

European Parliament president Martin Schultz also praised their release on Twitter but said it was "a belated move and they should have never been imprisoned in first place."

Once dubbed by Washington as "Europe's last dictator" for his authoritarian rule, Lukashenko now finds himself nursing chilled relations with former master Moscow over the Ukraine conflict while grappling with an economy that is dependent on Russia and has slid into recession.

He recently made a return to the international scene, hosting Ukraine peace talks in Minsk between pro-Moscow rebels and the leaders of

Ukraine, France, Germany and Russia.

The 60-year-old president was re-elected to a fourth term in December 2010 in a poll marred by a violent crackdown on the opposition.

Statkevich, now aged 58, was a rival candidate in that disputed election, and received a six year sentence in a sweeping probe into alleged mass riots following the polls.

Lukashenko's main rival in that election, Andrei Sannikov, founder of a pro-democracy movement, was also jailed but pardoned in April 2012.

The opposition has been all but wiped out as many key figures have left Belarus.

In an interview to opposition website Charter 97, Statkevich said he was freed because "Lukashenko has run out of money" and will now seek loans from both Russia and the International Monetary Fund.

Statkevich had been recognised as a political prisoner by Amnesty International, and Western officials regularly pushed for his release.

Earlier this month, Lukashenko had refused to give a definite answer about when Statkevich could be released, but suggested it could be before the October vote.

Another of the freed opponents, Mikola Rubsev, was arrested during the 2010 protests while wearing a t-shirt calling for Lukashenko to go.

The remaining four men in detention were accused of belonging to an anarchist group that clashed with the local KGB, successor of the Soviet secret police.

Govt to seek

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Tribunal-1 in February 2013 condemned Sayedee to death for committing crimes against humanity during the country's Liberation War in 1971.

Following an appeal against the judgment of the war tribunal, the Apex Court in September last year commuted the death penalty of the Jamaat-e-Islami leader to imprisonment until death.

"We will file the review petition with the Supreme Court, seeking his death penalty after obtaining its full verdict. We are waiting for the full judgment," the attorney general told reporters at his office.

He, however, could not say when the SC might release the full verdict.

Regarding the war crimes case against Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed, he said the SC would soon release the full verdict.

The SC on June 16 this year upheld the death penalty of Mojaheed for his crimes against humanity in 1971.

The government can prepare for his execution after getting the full judgment, the attorney general earlier said.

He had also said Mojaheed could seek a review of the SC verdict after receiving the full text of the judgment, and that the execution process would automatically be halted after the submission of the review petition.

Muhith hints

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The government has long resisted the call for cutting oil prices though petroleum prices have been on the decline on the international market for over a year.

US crude oil prices plunged below \$40 a barrel on Friday for the first time since the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, amid increasing signs that the prices will slide further.

Brent crude, the international benchmark, fell to its lowest since March 2009, touching \$45.10 a barrel.

However, the government is selling kerosene, diesel, octane and petrol at prices fixed in January 2013.

State-run Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation, the sole oil importer, is making a whopping profit of Tk 13 to Tk 36 a litre on petroleum products since January this year on the back of sliding global oil prices.

The World Bank recently called for introducing a system that makes automatic adjustment of oil prices in line with global market rates. It said the current macroeconomic conditions in Bangladesh and the low international oil prices provide a historic opportunity to deregulate domestic oil prices.

British embassy

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The reopening comes weeks after Iran reached a deal with six world powers aimed at curbing its nuclear programme.

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At the ceremony Hammond said the attack in 2011 had been "a low point" but since the election of President Hassan Rouhani things had "steadily improved, step by step".

Initially, the embassy will be headed by a charge d'affaires, Ajay Sharma, but Hammond said an agreement on upgrading to full ambassador status is expected to be reached in the coming months.

A trade delegation has also travelled to Tehran with Hammond and the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury Damian Hinds to discuss possible future trade opportunities.

Hammond said there was "huge appetite" from UK businesses interested in investing in Iran and creating conditions for British banks to be able to finance trade deals with the country.

In November 2011 Iran announced it was expelling the UK's ambassador in retaliation for British support for tougher sanctions on Tehran over its nuclear programme.

Hundreds of protesters stormed embassy compounds two days later, smashing windows, torching cars and burning Union flags.

The UK responded by closing the Iranian embassy in London later that month.

But following the election of Hassan Rouhani and an agreement on how to deal with Iran's nuclear programme, the then Foreign Secretary William Hague proposed the reopening of the embassy in June last year.

Since then, the reopening of the embassy has been held up by technical problems over visa policy and communications equipment, Hammond has said.

Muslim Ummah

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question of religion should not come when it came to terrorism.

The premier said Islam is a religion of peace and harmony that teaches about tolerance. "The essence of Islam should be known properly," she said.

Referring to the terrorist attacks on a Saudi Arabian mosque, Hasina strongly criticised the incident and said Islam never supported such heinous acts.

About the OIC's role in the development of education sector, the PM laid emphasis on science- and technology-based education in the context of the OIC's initiatives.

In this regard, Hasina mentioned that her government established a number of science- and technology-based universities in the country to promote science and ICT-based education.

Besides, she said her government had also been promoting research activities by allocating funds separately.

Highlighting the past glorious history of Muslim researchers, the prime minister said they were the pioneers of science-based education and scientific research, and mentioned

that her government made the religious education compulsory.

During the meeting, OIC Secretary General Madani said the OIC is now a 40-year-old organisation. "The basic philosophy of the organisation is to integrate Muslim countries."

About Bangladesh, he said the country is always in the forefront of the OIC activities and playing its due role there.

Madani invited the PM to attend the next OIC Summit to be held in 2016 in Istanbul, Turkey.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali and Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister Abul Kalam Azad were, among others, present during the meeting.

Later, Madani, who is leading a six-member delegation, also met Mahmood Ali at his ministry and discussed a wide range of issues and exchanged views on developments in the regional and international arena, particularly in the Muslim world, according to a foreign ministry press release.

The OIC chief also visited International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr). He arrived in Dhaka on a

Living on a train

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with my landlord," Müller told The Washington Post via e-mail. "I instantly decided I didn't want to live there anymore -- and then I realised: Actually, I didn't want to live anywhere anymore."

Instead, she bought a subscription that allows her to board every train in the country for free. Now, Müller washes her hair in the train bathroom and writes her college papers while travelling at a speed of up to 190 mph.

She says that she enjoys the liberty she has experienced since she gave up her apartment. "I really feel at home on trains, and can visit so many more friends and cities. It's like being on vacation all the time," Müller said.

The 23-year-old's unusual housing choice has gained her media attention in Germany and appeared on national news sites such as Spiegel Online.

"I read, I write, I look out of the window and I meet nice people all the time. There's always something to do on trains," Müller told German TV station SWR in an interview. Since risking the move, Müller's life fits into a small backpack in which she carries

clothes, her tablet computer, college documents and a sanitary bag.

So far, her experience contradicts studies that have recently claimed that "long commutes are killing you." And financially, she benefits from living on a train: The flat-rate ticket costs her about \$380, whereas she had to pay about \$450 for her previous apartment. However, living cheaper is not the only goal she has in mind.

"I want to inspire people to question their habits and the things they consider to be normal," Müller told The Post.

Müller frequently travels late at night, although she tries to sleep at the apartments of relatives or friends. Often, she is accommodated by her boyfriend, her mother or grandmother.

Living on a train is also supposed to have an academic purpose: Müller is documenting the unusual experiment on a blog. Her final undergraduate paper will be based on her experiences as a modern train-nomad. The only problem? "Possessing a headsets that mutes most surrounding noises is crucial," she said.

Four Qaeda suspects killed by 'US drone' in Yemen: official

AFP, Aden

Four suspected al-Qaeda militants were killed overnight in an apparent US drone strike in Mukalla, the southern Yemeni city that the extremist group overran in April, a local official said yesterday.

The four were travelling in a car on the tarmac of Mukalla's Al-Rayane airport that was struck by a missile fired by an "American drone", according to the unnamed official, killing them instantly.

The night strike follows a similar attack on Friday which killed three al-Qaeda suspects as they travelled through the central Marib province, tribal sources said.

The United States is the only country known to operate armed drones over Yemen, and strikes have continued on suspected militants even as the country has been battered by months of fighting between pro- and anti-government forces.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), viewed by Washington as the extremist network's most dangerous branch, has taken advantage of the chaos to seize Mukalla, capital of the vast desert Hadramawt province.

The group admitted in June that its leader in Yemen Nasir al-Wuhayshi had been killed in a drone strike.

Angry push for Guatemala president to resign in graft scandal

AFP, Guatemala City

Thousands of Guatemalans Saturday waved flags, chanted and demanded that President Otto Perez resign, in a graft scandal that has already seen his vice president step down.

Shouting "Otto - Thief," "Get out, Otto" and "Resign - and now!" the demonstrators packed the capital's main square, chanting, singing, waving the blue and white national flag and setting off firecrackers.

Perez refused to resign earlier, just hours after he was accused of being a leader of the corruption scandal that has rocked his country, his spokesman said.

"The people are asking for the resignation of the most thieving government in history led by Otto Perez," said Jose Catalan, toting a banner that read "Resign already Otto your prison awaits."

Catalan said he wanted Perez out, and a transitional government named to serve out Perez's term which under the constitution ends January 14.

"While I am really happy that thief (ex-vice president Roxana) Baldetti has been captured, it is time for them to take the other robber - President Perez -- to prison," added Ana Velasquez, a student at San Carlos University.

With just over two weeks to go to general elections, prosecutors and officials from a UN investigative commission said they had uncovered

extensive evidence implicating Perez and Baldetti in a massive, highly organized scheme to reduce importers' customs duties in exchange for bribes.

Baldetti had resigned, and was then arrested Friday. Business leaders issued a call for Perez to stand down immediately.

Presidential spokesman Jorge Ortega told AFP that Perez had not resigned.

But several of his cabinet members - on the heels of Friday's information - gave their vote of no confidence by standing down themselves on Saturday.

Economy Minister Sergio de la Torre; Education Minister Cynthia Del Aguila; and Competitiveness Commissioner Juan Carlos Paiz, all stepped down voicing disappointment at Perez's alleged starring role in the graft.

The multimillion-dollar fraud case has upended Guatemalan politics since it erupted in April, felling numerous high-ranking officials, forcing Baldetti's resignation and now reaching the country's highest office.

"We have found the very regrettable participation of the president of the republic and Mrs Roxana Baldetti at every level of the organization" behind the corruption, said Ivan Velasquez of the UN commission.

The allegations come as Guatemala prepares for general elections on September 6.

3 lawyers give

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He claimed that his clients returned the money to their client and that there's nothing wrong in this.

Md Kafil Uddin Chowdhury, another defence lawyer, said, "Though we could not talk with Farzana, we saw tears rolling down from her eyes. It is clear that she was intimidated."

Brushing aside the defence lawyers' claims, Bikash said they [Farzana and the other two] too are lawyers and if they felt threatened, they could convey it to the magistrate.

"These are false claims", said the state lawyer, adding that law enforcers were present in the area for the sake of security.

After taking their statements, the court of Senior Judicial Magistrate Sazzad Hossain of Banshkhali upazila sent the three to jail, rejecting their bail prayers moved by the defence lawyers.

On August 18, Rab men arrested Shakila Farzana, 39, and Hasanuzzaman Liton, 30, who reportedly practise at the Supreme Court, and Mahfuz Chowdhury Bapon, 25, who practises at the District Judge's Court of Dhaka, from the Dhanmondi area in Dhaka. Of them, Farzana is the daughter of former BNP Whip Syed Wahidul Alam.

The trio deposited a total of Tk 1.08 crore in the bank account of Moniruzzaman. Of the total money, Shakila deposited Tk 52 lakh in cash in two installments, Liton Tk 31 lakh and Bapon Tk 25 lakh, Rab claimed.

BCL leader's brother

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criticised the government for the recent "crossfire" incidents saying the killing of people in the name of "crossfire" should not happen in a civilised country.

"It's the government that should say why it is applying crossfire to maintain law and order. These [law and order issues] will have to be tackled through ideals and principles," he said emerging from a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on law ministry at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

According to rights body Ain O Salish Kendra, 72 people have died at the hands of law enforcers in "shootouts" in the first six months of this year. At least 25 people were killed in such "gunfights" or "shootouts" between July 1 and August 23, according to reports published in this newspaper.

In the case statement, Arzu's brother Masud said being influenced by a vested quarter, Ratan had delivered information to the accused three Rab officials who, to kill in a planned way, abducted Arzu from in front of Hazaribagh Park around 5:00pm last Monday.

Masud contacted the local police station but could not know his brother's whereabouts. Police later informed him that Arzu was in Rab custody.

Around 8:30 Tuesday morning, his family members learnt from neighbours that Arzu's bullet-riddled body had been found near Shikdar Medical College area.

Masud identified the body at Dhaka Medical College morgue.

He also alleged that when he went to Hazaribagh Police Station, police refused to accept a case or even a general diary regarding the matter.

"We enquired into the incident and found that no gunfight took place. He was abducted and murdered. I want justice," Masud told The Daily Star at his home yesterday.

Local Awami League lawmaker Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, also nephew of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, lashed out at Rab on Saturday for the deaths of Arzu and other ruling party men in so-called gunfights.

"We will not tolerate killings of our leaders and activists in the name of so-called gunfights and those responsible for the killings will be brought to book," said Taposh, the first from the ruling party to speak out recently over extra-judicial killings and to point a finger at law enforcement agencies.

A local, wishing not to be named, said, "It was an inhuman act to see the way Raja was killed. But the justice could be ensured through legal process."

Meanwhile, Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu at a programme at the Secretariat said, "Crossfire is not in the policy of the government."

"The government does not have a policy to control a political party through crossfire. No one will be spared," he said, adding that the government would not try or let go a criminal based on the political party he or she was affiliated with.

Sangakkara signs

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The Indian fielders shook hands with Sangakkara as he walked off for one last time to a standing ovation from the crowd.

"Thank you for all the love," Sangakkara wrote on his twitter feed @KumarSanga2 soon after play ended. "Been my privilege to play for my country and in front of all the fans."

Sangakkara follows Sachin Tendulkar of India, Ricky Ponting of Australia, Jacques Kallis of South Africa and Rahul Dravid of India in the all-time list of leading Test scorers.

Tendulkar, who retired in 2013, tweeted: "Well played @KumarSanga2. You have been a terrific ambassador for the game and a thorough gentleman. Warm welcome to the club of the retired!"

Former teammate Mahela Jayawardene, with whom Sangakkara shared a world record partnership of 624 against South

Africa in 2006, said he was proud of his close friend's achievements.

"It wasn't to be in this match but what he was for Sri Lanka cricket is something that you can't take away. Very proud of you mate," Jayawardene wrote.

A law student with a silver tongue, Sangakkara could easily get under the opposition's skin but the 2012 ICC Cricketer of the Year never crossed the line.

Like Jayawardene, Sangakkara wanted to quit international cricket soon after the World Cup but was urged to stay on, helping the side under Angelo Mathews as they embarked on a tricky transition.

Sangakkara, who has scored 63 international centuries, agreed to play four Tests, two each against Pakistan and India.

His fans desperately wanted him to score one more double century to equal Don Bradman's record of 12 but that was not to be.

Latif to quit parliament

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entary membership. As I am loyal, I will send my resignation letter to the Speaker," he added.

The commission held the hearing as AL and Latif were at loggerheads over the legality of his parliamentary membership after he was expelled from the party.

The AL requested the Speaker of parliament and the EC to scrap his membership, while Latif fought a legal battle to protect it.

At a programme in the US on September 28 last year, Latif Siddique, lawmaker from Tangail-4, made some comments that allegedly were against hajj, Tablighi Jamaat and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

On October 12, he was removed from the cabinet and from the party presidium, AL's highest policymaking body. He lost his primary membership in the AL 12 days later.

On October 14, the AL sent a show-cause notice to Latif as to why he would not be expelled from the party permanently for acting against the organisation's charter.

Latif at that time defended himself saying the AL dropped the word "Muslim" from its name in 1955 to give it a secular character. Moreover, the party ensured freedom of speech

and expression through its declaration. And so, he can "express his feelings on any issue".

The party informed Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury of the decision on July 5. She later sought the EC's opinion over legality of Latif's parliamentary membership.

Later on July 16, the EC asked Latif to explain why his parliamentary seat would not be vacated. The commission also asked AL to give its explanation over this issue the same day.

In reply, Latif and AL sent separate letters on August 2 to the EC defending their respective stances.

Latif said AL's decision to expel him from the party was a mistake, while AL requested the commission to scrap his membership following Representation of the People Order (RPO) as he was elected an MP under the party's token.

The EC yesterday arranged the hearing after that explanation and was supposed to give a verdict two weeks later.

Hours before this decision, the Supreme Court upheld a High Court order that scrapped Latif's appeal challenging the commission's decision to hold the hearing.