

Saudi Arabia plans tripling of Umrah visas

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia is planning to triple the number of visas it issues for the Umrah pilgrimage, newspapers reported yesterday, more than two weeks after a deadly hajj stampede.

The Saudi Gazette and Okaz newspapers quoted Hajj Minister Bandar al-Hajjar as saying that as many as 1.25 million pilgrims are expected to arrive each month starting next year.

That compares with 400,000 a month now, the reports said.

The new system would allow full use of massive expansion projects at the kingdom's holy sites, Hajjar was quoted as saying.

Umrah is a lesser pilgrimage carried out any time during the year.

The major hajj pilgrimage, which all Muslims with the means are expected to complete at least once in their lives, this year drew about two million faithful.

The number had declined, particularly because of a multi-billion-dollar expansion which began four years ago at the Grand Mosque in Makkah, Islam's holiest site.

The 400,000-square-metre Grand Mosque enlargement is the equivalent of more than 50 football pitches, and it will allow the complex to accommodate roughly two million people at once.

A crane working on the expansion collapsed into a courtyard of the mosque on September 11, killing at least 108 people including foreign pilgrims, just before hajj.

An even greater tragedy, the worst

ever in the history of the pilgrimage, occurred on September 24 during a stoning ritual at Mina, near Makkah.

The stampede killed at least 1,587 people, according to tallies issued by foreign officials in more than 30 countries.

The toll greatly exceeds the figure of 769 provided by Saudi Arabia.

A formal Saudi inquiry is under way into the stampede, which left hundreds of pilgrims still unaccounted for.

Efforts to identify the dead continue at a health ministry facility guarded by security officers in the Makkah suburb of Muissem, sources say.

Representatives from foreign consulates are allowed in to the single-storey building to try to identify bodies through albums of photographs, said a source familiar with the operation.



Five suspected JMB men, including an alleged attacker of pastor Luke Sarkar, are paraded before the media at the office of superintendent of police in Pabna yesterday. Law enforcers arrested them over the last few days.

PHOTO: AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU

MP denied bail over shooting child

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The following day, the boy's father filed a case against Liton for attempting to murder his son. The boy is now under treatment in Rangpur Medical College Hospital.

The HC bench of Justice M Enayetur Rahim and Justice Bhisshmadev Chakraborty observed that the accused should be sent to jail over such an allegation.

Having remained "on the run" since the shooting, Liton appeared before the HC bench for hearing of his bail petitions yesterday.

Barrister Moksadul Islam argued for the lawmaker in the court.

Attorney General Mahbubey Alam vehemently opposed the bail petitions.

After the court order, he said he would move the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court for an order so that law enforcers did not hesitate to arrest the lawmaker.

According to him, if the HC order remains in force as it is, then law enforcers may not arrest Liton before his surrender.

He, however, would not comment if there is any legal bar for cops to nab the MP following the HC order.

But advocate Khurshid Alam Khan, editor of Dhaka Law Reports, who was

present in the courtroom, told The Daily Star that there was no legal bar to this end, as the HC did not direct law enforcers not to harass or arrest him.

Besides, the HC asked all concerned, including the lower court and law enforcers, to deal with the cases against the lawmaker in line with the law, he added.

Liton's counsel opposed this view, saying the court allowed his client some time.

Contacted, Gaibandha Superintendent of Police Ashrafal Islam said police would not arrest the lawmaker because the HC gave him time to surrender to the trial court.

The other case in which the HC ordered Liton to surrender before the trial court involves vandalism and looting of a home in the area soon after the shooting.

Hafizur Mandal, a three-wheeler driver, filed the case against the MP and nine others who allegedly went on a rampage and looted his house in Uttar Shabazpur of Sundarganj upazila as the lawmaker stood by.

Hearing both the bail petitions, the judges said they were bound by the law and could not grant bail to an accused without examining whether the allegations against him were true or false.

At one stage, Liton's counsel sought to know why the minor boy had gone out so early in the morning.

To this, the court pointed out that his client also allegedly went out of his house, and that too with a pistol, so early in the morning.

Mahbubey Alam told the court that the offences of the lawmaker were so heinous that the HC could not grant him bail.

The law and the court should be strong against a powerful person, he said.

"If an accused of such a crime is granted bail, what message will it send to people?" he asked.

He also requested the court to order police to take Liton into custody from the court premises.

The lawmaker's counsel then prayed that the HC grant his client some time to surrender before the trial court.

Earlier in the morning, Moksadul filed the anticipatory bail petitions for hearing. But the court asked him to bring his client before the court as per the law.

Liton entered the courtroom around 1:00pm and left it after the HC order without speaking to the media.

He later told reporters at the chamber of his counsel that he was not hiding as reported in the media, but was only at a "safe place".

103 more return from Myanmar

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

One hundred and three more Bangladeshis, who were rescued by Myanmar navy in its coastal areas in May, returned home yesterday.

Over the handover of the 103, a commander-level flag meeting was held between the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and the Department of Myanmar Immigration and National Registration near zero point of Chumdhum border in Naikhyanchhari upazila of Bandarban in the morning.

The Myanmar authorities handed over the Bangladeshis to the BGB around 1:30pm.

Among the 103 returnees, 31 are from Bogra, 13 from Shariatpur, 12 from Narsingdi, nine from Jhenidah, seven from Narayanganj, six from Habiganj, four from Chittagong, three each from Joypurhat, Madaripur and Sunamganj, two each from Brahmanbaria, Bandarban, Gaibandha, Chandpur and Chuadanga, and one each from Feni and Pabna, said Asif Muneer, national programme officer of International Organization for Migration.

Maj Imran Ullah Sarker, acting commander of 17 BGB Battalion in Cox's Bazar, led the BGB team in the meeting.

Later, the Bangladeshi nationals were handed over to Cox's Bazar police for completion of legal procedures, said the BGB official. They were then taken to the temporary camp set up at Cox's Bazar Cultural Centre.

They would start handing over the returnees to their relatives from tomorrow [today] after interrogating them, said Shyamal Kumar Nath, superintendent of Cox's Bazar police.

Militants plotted

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foreigners in attacks reportedly claimed by IS, the government ruled out any organisational presence of the global jihadi outfit in Bangladesh.

According to the charge sheet, Kabir is an IS representative in Bangladesh, Nazrul a militant financier and Anwar a convict in an explosive case.

It also mentioned that the suspects were planning to destabilise the country's law and order and kill some important persons.

The Daily Star has obtained a copy of the charge sheet, submitted to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court in Dhaka on May 25.

Hearing on the charge framing against the accused will start on Thursday at the Fourth Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court, Dhaka.

Since September last year, about 15 suspects have been arrested for "having or trying to establish contacts" with IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL, according to police press releases and briefings at different times.

Yesterday, a Dhaka court placed two other arrested suspects -- Abdullah al Galib and Fida Muntasir Saker -- on a two-day remand each in cases filed for their alleged involvement in planning to collect members for IS and go to Syria.

Galib, Fida and their associates were recruiting fighters and collecting funds to wage jihad in Bangladesh, according to the case statements. They were also conspiring to "destabilise law and order and kill some important figures".

Galib, 27, son of an ex-army official, also launched a new militant organisation called "Jund At-Tawheed Wal Khilafah". He was arrested from his Baridhara residence on May 30 this year and Fida from his DOHS house on June 7.

The cases were filed with Cantonment Police Station.

Metropolitan Magistrate Meher Nigar Suchana passed the order after DB Inspector Rafiqul Islam, investigation officer of the cases, sought a seven-day remand for each of the accused.

In the remand prayer, the IO said Galib and Fida need to be remanded to trace some IS-linked suspects whose names the two arrestees had disclosed earlier.

On the other hand, defence lawyer submitted two separate petitions seeking bail along with cancellation of the remand prayer, saying the clients were earlier remanded thrice since their arrest.

The court rejected the defence pleas.

Govt can appoint administrators

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"The government will try to hold elections regularly, and in case of any complexity, an administrator will be appointed for an interim period," said the cabinet secretary.

At present, the government has the power to appoint administrators to zila parishads and city corporations. Exercising the power in December 2011, the government appointed ruling AL men as administrators to 61 zila parishads.

Since 2011, it also appointed more than a dozen government officials as administrators to the two Dhaka city corporations.

On the cabinet's approval to the proposal for making local body polls partisan, Musharraf said, "The government has decided to bring the changes to the local government system for the empowerment of elected representatives at grassroots level and the development of political and democratic culture in the country."

Local government polls are held on the basis of party nominations in major parliamentary democracies such as the UK and India, he said.

As per the proposed amendments, aspirants will be able to contest the

local body polls either as nominated candidates of any political party registered with the Election Commission or as independent candidates, said Musharraf.

As the municipality elections draw near and parliament is not in session, the president could promulgate an ordinance to amend the municipality laws, he added.

The municipality polls are scheduled to be held in December.

AL sources said party leaders believe if local body elections are made partisan, it will help the party minimise intra-party conflicts and reduce the number of rebel candidates during polls.

Since 2009, the AL couldn't achieve desired success in local body polls because of its rebel candidates. This was the case also in the upazila elections held between February and March last year, they added.

At yesterday's cabinet meeting, Prime Minister and AL President Sheikh Hasina said tough action would be taken against the party's grassroots leaders if any of them contests the upcoming municipality elections defying party decisions, said sources.

The party would nominate only one candidate against each post in the polls

and all in the party have to accept the decision, she told the meeting.

The next AL council would bring changes to the party constitution following the amendment to the local government laws, she said.

The existing AL constitution provides for a Parliamentary Board, headed by the party chief, which nominates party leaders for contesting parliamentary elections. Now, the party will have to form parliamentary boards from upazila to district level to nominate party men for local body polls.

Before amending the party constitution, the AL office will issue an order to this effect, according to sources.

PM ON FOREIGNERS' KILLING

At the cabinet meeting, the PM advised her colleagues to remain vigilant about "a conspiracy" against the government centring the recent killings of two foreigners, said sources.

Referring to some countries' alert over possible militant attacks in Bangladesh and advice for their nationals to limit movement here, the PM asked the ministers to "publicise militant activities in the countries that issued the red alert", a minister, who attended the meeting, told The Daily Star.

Alison Blake named new UK envoy

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The UK government yesterday named Alison Blake as the next British high commissioner to Bangladesh.

"Alison Blake has been appointed British High Commissioner to Bangladesh in succession to Robert W Gibson CMG, who will be transferring to another Diplomatic Service appointment," said a press release of the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

Blake will take up her new assignment in Dhaka in January next year, added the release.

Gibson has been in the post since September 2011. The diplomat was asked to continue in his role when his three-year tenure ended in September last year, diplomatic sources said.

Prior to her appointment as high commissioner to Bangladesh, Blake served as deputy high commissioner in Islamabad, head of Conflict Group at the FCO, UK's Cabinet Office and Defence & Overseas Secretariat, first secretary at UK Embassy in Washington DC, deputy head of



Eastern Adriatic Department, UK delegation to NATO, and first secretary in British mission in Brussels.

A high commissioner is the UK government's representative in a Commonwealth nation. He/ she is responsible for the direction and work of the mission and its deputy high commissions and/or consulates, including political work, trade and investment, press and cultural relations, and visa and consular services.



seeking to appoint administrators to run municipality, upazila and union parishads if their elections are not held on time.

At present, the government has powers to appoint administrators to zila parishads and the city corporations. In exercise of the powers, the government has appointed AL men as administrators to 61 zila parishads in December 2011 for an indefinite period, who are still serving in those roles.

It had also appointed over a dozen government officials as administrators since 2011 to the bifurcated Dhaka City Corporations until their elections were held last April.

Once the laws are amended, the government will have powers to appoint administrators to all the local government bodies if their elections are not held on time after the expiry of their tenure.

Each of the above measures runs counter to the ruling party's last two parliamentary election promises to strengthen the local government system.

Local govt bodies need more reform

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This allows the chief to act in an authoritarian manner.

Kamal Siddiqui, a former bureaucrat and local government expert, explains the reasons behind this culture in his book: "Local Government in Bangladesh."

In Bangladesh, he writes, presidential local government coexists with parliamentary central government not by design but because in 1991, the major political parties were interested to change only the structure of the central government which was presidential and identified with the autocratic rule of Ershad.

Eminent jurist Shahdeen Malik has said the government should change the local government bodies' laws to conform to the parliamentary form of the government.

The local government bodies, as Shahdeen Malik says, should also be given the power to make by-laws for their functioning. In many countries, the local government institutions have this power.

Local government expert Dr Tofail Ahmed has echoed Shahdeen Malik.

In this situation, the proposed changes in the local government bodies' laws to hold their elections on partisan lines will not ensure any qualitative change in their functions or power.

Even though, the current elections to the local government bodies' are theoretically non-partisan, the reality is that the polls are held in a partisan manner. The proposed change approved by the cabinet yesterday will only make the polls officially partisan.

It will bring no other changes in the functions of the local government bodies. In the current political atmosphere, it will in no way strengthen the democratic system and practices at the grassroots level as the LGRD ministry claimed.

There is a fear that the proposed changes may increase the influence of partisan politics over the local government bodies, which will further deteriorate the quality of their services. There is also a fear that this system may throw open the doors of nomination business to the major political parties.

To curb excessive influence of parti-

san politics in the local government bodies' functions, the past caretaker government had brought drastic reforms. The then government had introduced new provisions that on their elections chiefs of city corporations, upazila, and municipality must resign from party posts, if they hold any, before taking oath.

The mayors elected in four city corporations and eight municipalities in August 2008 had resigned from their party posts to take oaths.

The political parties including AL and BNP had strongly opposed the legal provision. Assuming the office in January 2009, the AL-led government did not allow that provision to continue.

And now, finally, the government has moved to hold the elections on partisan lines.

Local governments in UK and India, where these elections are held in partisan line, have significant authority to discharge their functions. But their chiefs do not hold absolute executive powers. They are accountable to the councils.

The government therefore should bring some reforms to empower the local government bodies--zila, upazila and union parishads, city corporations and municipalities. Otherwise, only cosmetic change will not benefit the local government bodies. The government's intention will also be questioned after the proposed changes in the local government laws.

There are reasons to be skeptic. They include making the MPs advisors to the upazila parishads, allowing the upazila nirbahi officers to run the parishads, bifurcating Dhaka city corporations and appointing party men as administrators to the zila parishads.

On October 1, the government empowered bureaucrats to lead the divisional and district coordination committees to monitor local development activities. This step has further weakened the local government system.

And yesterday, the cabinet came up with more good news for bureaucrats. It approved proposals for amendments to the local government laws

seeking to appoint administrators to run municipality, upazila and union parishads if their elections are not held on time.

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