



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina poses for a photograph with officers of the Armed Forces at the graduation ceremony of "DSCSC 2015-2016" course of Defence Services Command and Staff College at Mirpur Cantonment yesterday.

PHOTO: PMO

BANGLADESHI PEACEKEEPERS PM warns against unwarranted attitude, activities

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday warned that any unwarranted attitude and activities of Bangladeshi peacekeepers in UN missions will not be tolerated.

She was addressing the graduation ceremony of "DSCSC 2015-2016" course of Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC) at Mirpur Cantonment.

The PM said her government wants to keep Bangladesh peacekeepers' image unharmed. "We don't want our armed forces' reputation to be questionable."

Hasina's warning came in the wake of four child sex abuse cases in Central African Republic involving UN troops and police from Bangladesh, Congo, Niger and Senegal.

Bangladesh contributes 11,501 peacekeepers to 11 countries and this is the highest number from a single country, the premier said.

About the role of Bangladesh Armed Forces, she said they are contributing significantly towards restoring democracy, social development, health and education in different countries under the emblem of UN missions. Their success has further

brightened the country's image.

Since the start of UN peacekeeping missions in 1988, Bangladesh took part in 45 missions out of 66.

Apart from protecting the country's independence and sovereignty, members of the Armed Forces are also making significant contributions to fight natural calamities like Sidr and Aila, said the PM.

They are showing their capability in carrying out special development activities and massive infrastructure construction. Besides, they act as aides of civil administration in different purposes, including maintaining law and order, mentioned Hasina.

She said the Armed Forces are always alert to protect the country's independence. "You'll have to remain always ready to make any sacrifice for protecting the country's independence and sovereignty."

DSCSC Commandant Maj Gen Sajjadul Haque delivered the welcome address at the function.

Earlier, the premier distributed certificates among the graduating officers.

Ministers, the leader of the opposition in parliament, chiefs of the three services, lawmakers, and other high civil and military officials were present.

'Attempt to crush independent media'

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That's why it is so shocking that Anam now stands accused of treason, no less.

Sajeed Wajed, the son of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has described him as "completely unethical" and a liar, and has demanded he be thrown in jail.

Before going into the details of the allegations against Anam, it is important that the claims are set in context, because it is hard not to see this as the latest line of attack in a concerted effort to gag one of the last independent media organisations in the country.

INCOMES HIT

The Daily Star and its sister publication Prothom Alo - the most widely read Bengali newspaper in the country - are already the subject of a clandestine attempt to undermine their finances.

The BBC understands that since last summer businesses, including some of the largest telecoms and consumer goods companies in Bangladesh, have been ordered to restrict their advertising in the two newspapers by the country's military intelligence agency.

The Norwegian company that owns Grameen Phone, Bangladesh's largest mobile phone operator, has admitted as much to Al Jazeera. Telenor's head of communications confirmed that, "along with several other large corporations, [it] received an instruction from the authorities to stop advertisements in two leading newspapers in Bangladesh".

The Daily Star and Prothom Alo are reckoned to have lost about a third of their income.

Yet the order has no basis in law, according to the leading commentator on Bangladesh politics, David Bergman.

"It is simply 'enforced' through the

authority that comes from being the country's most feared intelligence agency," he argues.

But its intent is clear: it is about bringing independent media into line and stifling dissent.

The message is "cross the line and we'll take action", but since no clear line has been drawn it is up to the media to police itself.

And it seems to be working.

'INTIMIDATION'

"There is not a single newspaper or TV editor in this country who does not know about the blockade," writes Bergman, "yet not one of the nearly 30 TV stations, nor one of the countless newspapers has reported about this intimidation of the Daily Star and Prothom Alo."

When I spoke to Bangladeshi information minister Hasanul Haq Inu, he denied that he knew of any such order.

He told me that if the newspapers or any of the companies involved register an official complaint, he would be happy to investigate, and said that if any illegal restriction is being imposed on businesses in Bangladesh, he will take action.

While the restrictions on advertising in the Daily Star are not getting much attention in the Bangladeshi press, the allegations of treason by Anam are getting plenty of publicity.

That is because Anam has admitted he has made mistakes.

'BAD JUDGEMENT' - BUT

TREASON?

In a television interview earlier this month, he conceded that reports published in the Daily Star in 2007 alleging corruption by the woman who is now prime minister were based on uncorroborated leaks from the then military government.

He said he was wrong to have published them.

"It was a big mistake," he said during the interview. "It was a bad editorial judgement, I admit it without any doubt."

But whether his mistakes constitute treason is another matter entirely.

The prime minister's son claims that the articles were an attempt by Anam and the Daily Star to "support a military dictatorship in an attempt to remove my mother from politics".

That is something Anam vigorously denies, with justification.

He points to 203 editorials published during the period of military rule demanding that democracy be restored. That amounts to one every three days of the so-called "emergency government".

He also points out his newspaper was very critical when Sheikh Hasina was arrested in connection with the corruption charges.

"To us Sheikh Hasina's arrest is totally misconceived and smacks of arrogant use of power without due process of law," his editorial thundered, the day after the arrest was made.

COURT DECISION

What is more, none of the allegations against Sheikh Hasina and other party members was ever tested in court because all charges were dropped by executive order when her Awami League assumed power in 2008.

By contrast, similar claims of corruption made against the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), were allowed to stand. Many BNP politicians are still technically on bail from the charges.

Haq, the Information Minister, denies there is any campaign against

the Daily Star.

He says the complaints against Anam are being made by individuals and are not being co-ordinated by the government. "A judgement on whether he is guilty will be made by the courts on the basis of the merits of the case," he told me.

But Bergman has no doubt about the real significance of these attacks on Anam. He believes they are "an attempt to crush independent media".

He is convinced that government loyalists want "to close down, or at least subdue, any influential independent media or dissent that is not within their control".

'LEGAL HARASSMENT'

That would represent a very sinister power grab in an already fragile democracy like Bangladesh.

Since Bangladesh's media appears too cowed to speak out, it is time the rest of the world does.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has condemned what it calls the "legal harassment" of Anam. Now governments must do the same.

And where better to start than the UK government?

A few weeks ago Alison Blake, the new British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, was celebrating how "as two Commonwealth countries, we share a set of core values, including a commitment to Parliamentary democracy and a tolerant and pluralistic system with a commitment to protect and uphold human rights".

It might be time Blake challenges the Bangladeshi government to deliver on that commitment.

(Justin Rowlett, BBC South Asia correspondent)

CASES AGAINST MAHFUZ ANAM

Journos, rights activists want those withdrawn

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Journalists and several rights and professional bodies yesterday demanded withdrawal of all cases filed against The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam.

Mentioning that the filing of dozens of defamation cases against Mahfuz Anam is just harassment and shocking, a faction of Dhaka Union of Journalists (DUJ) sought Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's intervention.

In a statement, DUJ President Elahi Newaz Khan Saju and General Secretary Khairul Alam Bakul observed that the unprecedented number of cases against Anam can in no way be suitable for democracy. "It's nothing but evil efforts to gag the media and stifle its independence."

Referring to the 1/11 changeover, the DUJ leaders said, "... Even, it was heard that many leaders of the country's two major parties were involved in the 1/11 episode, and almost all of them are now in their places in their own parties."

Bothersome cases are being filed

against Mahfuz Anam one after another for reports published in The Daily Star years ago, they added.

The DUJ leaders said they think Anam admitted his editorial misjudgement out of his sense of ethics and principles.

Statement of Jahangirnagar University Journalists' Association (JUJA) echoed the sentiment. It read, "He [Mahfuz Anam] has shown courage and set an example by disclosing what happened, and he should be praised for the way he said the truth."

JUJA President Belal Hossain Rahat and Secretary Moudud Ahmed Sujjan termed the incident of filing cases "an attack on free media and ill motive to control the media".

"The cases were clearly politically motivated to harass Mahfuz Anam, editor of the leading English daily, and to create panic among people practising ethical journalism in the country. We demand immediate initiatives to settle the issue," read the JUJA's press release.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh National

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Star editor faces 6 more lawsuits

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Rashed Mahbub, counsel for the plaintiff, said his client wanted to file a libel suit with a compensation claim of Tk 50,000 crore against the Star editor, as the newspaper allegedly published a "report against Sheikh Hasina."

So far 75 lawsuits have been filed against Mahfuz Anam in 50 districts since February 9.

Of the cases, 17 involve pleas for bringing sedition charges against him, while the rest are defamation suits.

The case spree began days after the Star editor at a talk show on February 3 made an introspective comment about a lapse in his editorial judgement in publishing a few reports, based on

information given by the Task Force Interrogation Cell during the 2007-08 tenure of the last caretaker government, without being able to verify those independently.

The lawsuits filed against the Star editor allege that the reports run by this newspaper led to the arrest of AL President Sheikh Hasina during the tenure of the last caretaker government.

COMILLA

Abdur Razzak, president of Nangolkot upazila BCL unit, yesterday filed a defamation suit with the court of Senior Judicial Magistrate Razia Sultana against Mahfuz Anam.

The court took the case into cogni-

sance and asked the district informa-

tion officer to submit a report on March 24.

With this lawsuit, a total of five libel cases have been filed against the Star editor in the district in the last four days.

MYMENSINGH

Md Altaf Hossain Rana, a freedom fighter and president of Gafargaon upazila unit of Bangabandhu Sangskritik Jote, filed a defamation suit with the court of Senior Judicial Magistrate SM Razibul Hasan against Mahfuz Anam.

The complainant demanded compensation of Tk 10 crore.

The court took the case into cogni-

sance and summoned the Star editor to appear before it on March 27, said

Court Inspector Nowjesh Ali Mia.

Four cases have so far been lodged against Mahfuz Anam in the district.

NARAIL

Wahedur Rahman, president of Dighalia union AL, filed a plea with the Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court, seeking to bring a sedition charge against the Star editor.

The complainant also brought a defamation charge against Mahfuz Anam, demanding Tk 100 crore in compensation.

The court asked police to submit a report in this regard on March 16.

LALMONIRHAT

Syeda Shilpi Begum, wife of an AL activist, lodged a plea with the

Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court for bringing sedition charges against Mahfuz Anam.

The complainant also brought a defamation charge against the Star editor.

Shilpi, who claimed herself as an AL supporter, told journalists that she was advised by her husband to file a lawsuit against Mahfuz Anam.

She said her husband Syed Belal Hasan is an AL activist in the capital.

The court ordered the OC of Lalmonirhat Sadar Police Station to investigate the matter upon taking permission from government.

MADARIPUR

Advocate Siddiqur Rahman, treasurer

of district AL and vice president of the district lawyer's association, filed a defamation suit with Madaripur Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court against the Star editor, claiming Tk 10 crore in compensation.

The court took the case into cogni-

sance and summoned Mahfuz Anam to appear before it on March 6.

BRAHMANBARIA

Bijay Krishna Mallik, vice president of district Swachhchasebak league unit, filed a defamation suit with the Senior Judicial Magistrate's Court, claiming Tk 10 crore in compensation.

The court asked the officials concerned to probe the matter and file a report on March 30.

Experts caution against anomalies

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The MoU will prevent false labour elements and trafficking-in-person activities, he said.

POSSIBLE MONOPOLY

The realities, however, do not speak the same.

According to an official of the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, the name of Synerflux has not been mentioned in the MoU, and yet Malaysia has selected the company to regulate the recruitment process through online.

Mohammed Abul Basher, president of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira), in a letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on February 16 said the company through its syndicate members would have scopes for making profits unilaterally and deceiving workers.

It was not Synerflux alone, however. Since June last year, other companies like Bestinet and Real Time Networking also lobbied Malaysia and

Bangladesh governments to win contract, but finally Malaysia chose Synerflux.

According to Malaysian media, Synerflux is owned -- directly or indirectly -- by relatives of a ruling party minister.

Though migration cost in the deal has been set at Tk 37,000 per worker, it is bound to go up significantly if there is a syndicate of several agencies working from behind, said Professor CR Abrar, who teaches International Relations at Dhaka University and researches migration.

During 2007-08, it was fixed at Tk 84,000, but in reality the cost went up over Tk 2 lakh. More people were hired than needed, leaving many jobless. Many of those who got jobs were underpaid or even unpaid as many were recruited for companies that did not exist. Thousands returned home sick and empty-handed.

That prompted both the governments to go for the G2G process in late 2012. Under the system, migration

cost was fixed at Tk 32,000, but only some 10,000 workers were hired in plantation jobs.

Experts question why all other sectors were not opened under the G2G.

"It is said that G2G was made to fail, but has our government assessed why it failed?" said the professor.

Industry insiders say powerful lobbies saw to it that the project fails and they are the ones behind the new deal.

"If workers can be sent at Tk 37,000 this time, it is good. But it is very difficult to be optimistic. Chances are that there will be a repeat of the 2007-08 situations," Abrar added.

LOW WAGE

When real wage in Malaysia has gone down, Bangladesh has failed to lobby for higher minimum pay for workers.

"Such a deal with low wages is ridiculous," said a Baira leader.

to its influence.

However, a joint secretary of the expatriates' welfare ministry said the Bangladeshis would get the same salaries as the Malaysians' under the law.

MALAYSIAN ECONOMY DOWN

As Malaysia's economy is now slowing in the face of falling oil prices, real earnings of the Bangladeshis have come down. The value of one ringgit, which was Tk 24-27 in 2012, has fallen to Tk 18.

It now takes more than 4.2 ringgits to buy one dollar, which was a little over 3 ringgits early last year.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) President Datuk Shamsuddin Bardin said due to the current economic climate "an influx of migrant workers may result in an oversupply".

Currently, there are about 2.1 million registered foreign workers and there are plans by the Government to legalise between two and three million undocumented workers soon, he

added.

Mohammad Harun Al Rashid, regional coordinator of Caram Asia, a regional NGO on migration, said thousands of Bangladeshis workers in Malaysia were already in problems -- with low-paid jobs or joblessness.

"Hiring fresh workers without ensuring a foolproof mechanism will create another disaster like that of 2007-08," he told this paper by phone from Kuala Lumpur.

He questioned why a certain company is involved in recruitment from Bangladesh, which is not the case of other labour-source countries like Nepal or Indonesia.

Besides, thousands of low-skilled Bangladeshis were employed in Malaysia in professional categories in the last few years, but most of them are now jobless and undocumented, Harun added.

Prosecutor Ali

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The action came four days after the Chief Prosecutor Office of the Tribunal wrote to the law ministry seeking "necessary actions" against the prosecutor for "breaching discipline and code of conduct, and serious professional misconduct".

On February 14, Ghulam Arief Tipoo wrote to the ministry that Ali had recently "disobeyed" his assigned duties and tried to "exert illegal influence for securing bail for an accused in a case pending with the Tribunal".

Though the accused was not named in the letter, several prosecutors say it was Jatiya Party lawmaker MA Hannan, arrested last year for his alleged crimes during the 1971 Liberation War.

The Tribunal, however, denied him bail on February 4. On that day, the Chief Prosecutor Office withdrew Ali until further notice from all the war crimes cases he was involved with.

Ali, however, denies all the allegations against him and alleges that a group of prosecutors has raised the allegations "simply out of professional jealousy".