



PHOTO: REUTERS

Employees of Zaman newspaper gather at the courtyard of the newspaper during a protest in Istanbul on Friday.

'Darkest days' in history for Turkey's press freedom

'Anti-Erdogan' newspaper laments after authority seizes control of it in midnight raid; US, EU urge Ankara to respect media freedom; police uses rubber bullets to disperse protesters

AFP, Istanbul

A leading Turkish newspaper opposed to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and seized by authorities warned of the "darkest days" in the history of the press yesterday in a defiant edition as police used rubber bullets to disperse a new protest.

The late-night swoop against the Zaman newspaper raised fresh concerns over declining media freedoms in Turkey, a key European Union ally, ahead of a visit by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to Brussels Monday for a crucial summit meeting with EU leaders.

Zaman, closely linked to Erdogan's arch-foe, the US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen, was on Friday placed under the control of a board of trustees after a court order which critics said was another attempt to silence opposition media.

"The Constitution is suspended," the newspaper, which managed to print its latest issue despite the takeover, said on its front page in large font on a black background.

"Yesterday (Friday) marked one of the darkest days in the history of Turkish press," it said.

Turkish riot police yesterday fired rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse a new protest by the newspaper's supporters outside its Istanbul headquarters.

"Free press cannot be silenced," a group of demonstrators shouted.

Police used large amounts of tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets to disperse around 500 people, an AFP photographer at the scene reported.

Zaman, with an estimated circulation of 650,000, went to print earlier than usual on Friday evening before the police raid and the number of its pages was reduced to 16 from 24, one of its journalists said.

Sevgi Akarcesme, the editor-in-chief of the paper's English language edition Today's Zaman, said on Twitter yesterday that the newspaper office had had all Internet connections cut.

"We are not able to work anymore," she wrote.

During Friday's raid, police first cleared protesters with tear gas and water cannon, then used bolt-cutters to open the gates before dozens of officers marched in to take over the building and formally place it under administration, media images showed.

Once the building was cleared, court-appointed administrators were bussed inside the complex to begin their work, local media reported.

The new administrators yesterday fired Zaman's editor-in-chief Abdulhamit Bilici, press reports said.

On an official visit to Iran, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu denied any government interference in the seizure of the newspaper.

"They are certainly not political but

legal processes," he said in remarks carried by Turkish television.

"Turkey is a state governed by rule of law... It is out of the question for neither by me nor any of my colleague to interfere in this process," he said.

But he cautioned: "We should not shut our eyes to ... a parallel structure within the state using the press and other tools" to promote its agenda.

The raid prompted a worried response from the European Union, which urged Ankara to respect media freedom.

"The EU has repeatedly stressed that Turkey, as (an EU) candidate country, needs to respect and promote high democratic standards and practices, including freedom of the media," the EU's diplomatic services said in a statement.

The Russian foreign ministry called for a probe by the international community including the Council of Europe into the crackdown.

Washington also urged Turkey to protect freedom of speech, saying the court order was "the latest in a series of troubling judicial and law enforcement actions taken by the Turkish government targeting media outlets and others critical of it."

Emma Sinclair-Webb, senior Turkey researcher for Human Rights Watch, called the court order "a veiled move by the president to eradicate opposition media and scrutiny of government policies."

No charges pressed yet

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newspapers ran stories based on the draft with quotes from top-ranking Rab officials about involvement of around a dozen people in the murder.

Rab Additional Director General Col Ziaul Ahsan in March 2014 told a newspaper that they found involvement of Ajmeri Osman and his 10 associates in Taqi murder. He had also said that the charge sheet would be submitted any day.

Ajmeri is the son of ex-Jatiya Party MP Nasim Osman and nephew of ruling Awami League MP Shamim Osman.

Contacted yesterday, Col Ziaul Ahsan declined to say anything about his 2014 comment and the draft report. Asked about delay in pressing charges, he said, "Keep patience."

Narayanganj City Corporation Mayor Selina Hayat Ivy yesterday told The Daily Star over the phone that unlike probes into murders of children, Taqi murder investigation was going on very slowly. "I demand all the probes be conducted with equal

importance."

Taqi's father Rafiur Rabbi has been alleging for over a year that the killers of his son could not be brought to book due to intervention from influential people.

He believes that the country's law enforcement agencies are efficient enough to crack such a case in six months.

Despite repeated attempts yesterday, Shamim Osman could not be reached for his comments.

Meanwhile, speaking at a rally in Narayanganj on Friday, Monjurul Ahsan Khan, former president of Communist Party of Bangladesh, said, "It's a mystery why the charge sheet has not been submitted yet. People will say the prime minister has no sincerity in this regard [probe] and that is why the matter is kept hanging."

The rally was organised by Santras Nirmul Taqi Mancha to mark the third anniversary of Taqi murder.

Oikya NAP President Pankaj Bhattacharya alleged, "The state appears to be into oppressing the trial. Such an opposition cannot be taken lightly. If it

is an unofficial indemnity, we will have to unite and stand against it."

Seventeen-year-old Taqi went missing after he had left home for Sudhijon Pathagar, a library, around 4:00pm on March 6, 2013.

His A-level results were out the next day and he emerged as the highest scorer in the world in physics by obtaining 297 out of 300. In chemistry, he got 294 out of 300, the highest score to be obtained in the subject by anyone in the country. He was a student of ABC International School.

Taqi's body was found floating in the Shitalakhya river on the morning of March 8.

After Taqi's going missing, Rabbi filed a general dairy with Narayanganj Kotwali Police Station on March 6, 2013.

On March 8, 2013, he filed a murder case with the same police station.

Rabbi submitted a complaint to the Narayanganj superintendent of police on March 18 that year, accusing seven people, including Shamim Osman and his son Ayon Osman and 8-10 unnamed others, of the murder.

STATE ELECTIONS IN INDIA

Congress seeks to regain lost magic

TNN, New Delhi

Each of the states that will contest assembly polls will witness fierce contests, with the stakes being high for key players particularly Congress, which will be facing a major electoral test at a time when the party is hoping to claw back some lost ground following its debacle in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

In Assam, Tarun Gogoi has a strong electoral record but faces an emergent BJP that has alliances with AGP and Bodo People's Front, projected a tribal as CM and roped in Congress rebel Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Success for the Congress in Assam, one of the key states with a large minority population, will be a boost as it will be a hard-fought win and will

vindicate the efficacy of the party's state organisation. BJP, on the other hand, was powered by a Modi wave to seven LS seats in 2014 but doesn't have as good an organisational presence. With the NaMo factor having waned, the party hopes that its alliance with AGP and BPF will help it score its maiden Assam victory: A feat that can help it regain political momentum after embarrassing losses in Delhi and Bihar.

In Bengal, Congress in combination with the Left is the underdog. Mamata holds the advantage though the fact that she tried to keep Congress in good humour to prevent it from aligning with CPM suggests that she doesn't underestimate the challenge. The feisty leader will bank on her popular appeal, pro-poor schemes and the

perception that voters remain wary of the Left to win a second time despite some urban disaffection.

In spite of facing Left in a direct contest in Kerala, the Congress leadership has gone with the sentiment of its state unit which is strongly opposed to any understanding with Mamata. The possibility of posing a credible challenge to Trinamool has drawn Left and Congress together.

Bengal is a distant port for BJP. But after defeats in Delhi and Bihar, it needs to show an expanded footprint to rebut the perception that the Modi magic is dimming and counter claims of its rivals that it's been unable to deliver on poll promises after assuming office. In Tamil Nadu, too, BJP can look for limited gains, a few wins and a larger vote share being its objectives.

Fighting religious extremism AL's main challenge

Says Quader; sees no strong opposition

UNB, Dhaka

Observing that the Awami League has no strong opposition in politics right now, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader yesterday said the ruling party's main challenge is to tackle religious extremism.

"A pernicious campaign is underway against Bangladesh. I want to clearly say that Awami League has no strong opposition in politics right now. We have a common danger and that is religious extremism," he told a press briefing after a joint meeting of the party at the AL president's Dhanmondi office.

He said the BNP's so-called movement is not a challenge for the AL.

Quader, also an AL presidium member, said late Ziaur Rahman in an article run by the now-defunct Dainik Bangla and Bichitra on the historic day said they had received the green signal of independence through the historic speech of Bangabandhu on March 7, 1971.

"But it's unfortunate the BNP founded by Ziaur Rahman doesn't observe the historic March 7."

AL central leaders, presidents and general secretaries of its Dhaka, Narayanganj, Manikganj, Gazipur and Munshiganj district units, and party lawmakers from those districts attended the meeting as part of preparation to hold a public rally at Suhrawardy Udyan tomorrow.

AL President and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will address the rally.

'Mother' kills toddler in Kishoreganj

UNB, Kishoreganj

A two-year-old boy was murdered allegedly by his "mentally challenged" mother in Paradanga village under Kishoreganj Sadar upazila yesterday.

The child, Mahathir, was the son of Abul Kalam Azad of Karimganj upazila.

Mir Mosharrif Hossain, officer-in-charge of Kishoreganj Model Police Station, said Salma Akhter, 30, along with her child had gone to her house in Paradanga village recently.

Around noon yesterday, she allegedly slit the throat of the boy. On information, police recovered the body and arrested Salma.

Family members of Salma said she had tried to commit suicide several times.

Woman's body

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abdomen, chest, neck and other parts was dumped near a house on Road-12, said Sirajul Islam, officer-in-charge of Gulshan Police Station.

The victim, aged around 28, was wearing black jeans and her dress had blood everywhere, he said. "She seems to be an indigenous woman."

Police suspect that the victim was murdered elsewhere as there was a little blood on the spot.

The killers might have fled in a vehicle after dumping the body on the road, said the OC.

The body was sent to Dhaka Medical College morgue for autopsy, he said, adding that police were trying to arrest the culprits.

The identity of the victim could not be known till last night.

Pope shocked by 'diabolical' attack on Yemen care home

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis has slammed as "diabolical" an attack on an elderly care home in Yemen in which at least 16 people were killed, including four nuns, the Vatican said yesterday.

"His Holiness Pope Francis was shocked and profoundly saddened to learn of the killing of four Missionaries of Charity (nuns) and 12 others at a home for the elderly in Aden," the Vatican's Secretary of State Pietro Parolin said.

"He sends the assurance of his prayers for the dead and his spiritual closeness to their families and to all affected from this act of senseless and diabolical violence," Cardinal Parolin said in a statement.

Four gunmen stormed the facility housing dozens in Aden's Sheikh Othman district on Friday, killing a guard before tying up and shooting employees, security officials told AFP.

Screams of elderly residents echoed from the home during the shooting rampage, witnesses said. Among the dead were four foreign nuns working as nurses.

bKash rep shot, mugged Tk 14 lakh

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Muggers shot a bKash sales representative in the leg and snatched Tk 14 lakh from him at Taltola in the capital yesterday, said police.

The incident happened around 2:30pm when the victim, Saidul Islam, 40, and two other representatives of the company were going towards Dhanmondi in a car.

They had collected the money from several bKash agents in Taltola area, said police.

Quoting witnesses, GG Biswas, officer-in-charge of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Police Station, said a CNG-run auto-rickshaw intercepted the car's way after it reached near Taltola

Sangeet College.

Within no time, six muggers rushed to the scene on three motorbikes and broke the windows of the car with iron rods. The criminals then shot Saidul in the leg and fled snatching a bag from the car, he said.

The attackers fired blank shots while fleeing, said the police official, adding that the bag had Tk 14 lakh in it.

The injured was admitted to nearby Pongu Hospital, officially known as National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedics Rehabilitation (Nitor).

bKash is a mobile phone based payment switch.

Teesta deal finalised

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But it was shelved at the eleventh hour in the face of opposition from West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

Speaking at another session, Prof Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), emphasised basin-wise water management.

He said both the countries had waited 40 years for getting the Land Boundary Agreement settled. "But we cannot afford another 40 years to solve the water-sharing issues," he said, arguing that water is directly related to food insecurity and migration.

Earlier in the day, speakers at a panel discussion on security urged the South Asian countries to be serious about fighting terrorism.

Foreign Secretary Md Shahidul Haque dubbed the current Indo-Bangla relations to be at its best and a model of bilateral ties in the region.

"Grid connectivity and bandwidth sharing seemed unimaginable a decade ago, but it has become a reality now," he said.

The foreign secretary said there are still some unresolved issues, which can be settled, adding that water-sharing of all common rivers holds the key to further cooperation.

He proposed that the two countries explore opportunities in the areas of blue economy, renewable and nuclear energy and space and satellite.

MJ Akbar, national spokesperson of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, who was chairing the session, said what was once unachievable and unthinkable in the Indo-Bangla relations has become achievable.

He said security is the key to peace on both sides of the border.

"Security only comes when there is confidence," he said, adding that there is a problem of psychological insecurity between India and Bangladesh.

Both Akbar and Prof Syed Manzoorul Islam of English at Dhaka University said nations have to be honest in their cooperation in case of counter-terrorism.

"If the state actors give leap services, nothing can be achieved," said Prof Manzoorul Islam.

Abdur Rashid, executive director of Dhaka-based Institute of Conflict, Law and Development Studies, called for bringing all countries on board to counter radicalisation.

He put emphasis on social inclusion, non-immunity for hate preachers, uniform education, bringing all sorts of madrasas under one regulator and incorporating Islamic scholars and imams in the fights against terrorism.

Sripriya Ranganathan, joint secretary of the external affairs ministry of India, said the two neighbouring countries could go a long way in exploring potentials of the blue economy following settlement of disputes over maritime boundary.

Alok Bansal, a director of the India Foundation, a think-tank, said the two countries could go for healthy border management now following the resolutions of disputes over land boundary and maritime boundary.

He added both the countries are the largest contributors of peacekeeping forces to the United Nations. "In the future the two countries may need to work together to maintain regional peace."

Swapan Dasgupta, a senior journalist of India, gave an example of deepening relations between India and Bangladesh.

He said the Land Boundary Agreement was passed in the Indian parliament unanimously although very few bills are passed in the assembly without any opposition.

He further said there is a tendency in India to view Bangladesh in the prism of West Bengal. "But it is suicidal because Bangladesh is a sovereign country although there might be cultural affinity between Bangladesh and West Bengal."

Dasgupta added a big opportunity is now there to enhance the Indo-Bangla relations.

"We have to seize this opportunity. Big opportunities come rarely in the history," he observed.

Qamrul for rehearing

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A war crimes tribunal in November 2014 sentenced Quasem to death for crimes against humanity committed during the Liberation War.

A member of Jamaat central executive council, Quasem challenged the verdict and sought acquittal on all charges.

Qamrul, who was state minister for law when the tribunal was formed in 2010, told the discussion that the chief justice in an open court made some observations that raised questions about the prosecutors and investigators' role in the trial.

"I am aggrieved by his comments in the open court," the minister said. Qamrul alleged that the comments had similarities with those by some political parties opposed to the war crimes trial.

"He [Quasem] is now in the condemned cell, but his money is well active outside the prison...."

"I have a clear suggestion... Let there be a bench of the Appellate Division, keeping the present chief justice out of the bench, which he now leads, and then let there be a fresh hearing of the appeal. This is my demand in clear terms. There is no other option," he said, and "humbly requested" the chief justice to accept his proposal.

Going along with the chief justice, the attorney general also criticised the prosecution, although he was duty-bound to conduct the case properly, Qamrul said.

Moreover, the AG does not take any assistance from the prosecution to conduct the cases, he alleged.

The minister insisted that the government was holding the trial of the 1971 genocide perpetrators to end the culture of impunity, defying pressure from different quarters.

And the trial is being held maintaining international standards, he added.

Contacted, Mahbubey Alam just said, "You cannot comment on all sorts of statements."

Speaking at the discussion, Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel

Haque said if the chief justice had indeed made such comments in the open court, as a judge and responsible citizen, he must as well know the remedy.

Ekkattor Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee, which champions the war crimes trial, organised the discussion titled "Conspiracy against the trial of the 1971 genocide perpetrators: Responsibilities of the government, judiciary and civil society" at BILLA auditorium in the city.

Shahriar Kabir, executive president of the organisation, presented the concept paper, which was jointly written by him and Prof Muntassir Mamoon, Shaheed Jaya Shyamolli Nasrin Chowdhury, eminent sculptor Ferdous Priyobhashinee and eminent cultural personality Nasir Uddin Yousuff.

Sector Commander Abu Osman Chowdhury, former Supreme Court judge Md Shamsul Huda, trustee of the Liberation War Museum Mofidul Hoque, International Crimes Tribunal's prosecutors Zead Al Malum and Tureen Afroz, journalists Khandker Moniruzzaman and Swadesh Roy and Tawheed Reza Noor, son of martyred journalist Serajuddin Hossain, also spoke at the programme.

A written speech of former SC judge AHM Shamsuddin Choudhury Manik was read out by his daughter Nadia Choudhury.

5 Bangladeshis

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Mizanur Rahman, first secretary (labour) of the Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh, has visited the victims, he added.

According to a private television channel in Bangladesh, the deceased were identified as Ershad Ali, Nurul Islam, Abdul Khalek, Sohail Mia and Nannu Mia.

Details could not be known immediately. Riyadh police is probing the incident, Mushi said, adding that the embassy would arrange the repatriation of the bodies in a week after completing the formalities.