

ARSON CASE Fakhrul, 25 others cleared of charges

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday cleared BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and 25 other leaders and activists of the BNP-led 20-party alliance of arson charges in a case filed over a bomb attack on a bus in the city.

The other BNP leaders include Goyeswar Chandra Roy, Mirza Abbas, Mahbub Uddin Khokon and Amanullah Aman.

Judge Md Kamrul Hossain Mollah of the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court passed the order after the investigating officer (IO) of the case appealed to the court to clear the 26 of the charges.

On January 3, 2014, some criminals hurled a petrol bomb at a bus in the capital's Paribagh around 6:45am, leaving a passenger killed and several others injured.

Ramna police on that night filed a case in this regard under Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009, accusing unnamed people.

Law enforcers later picked up Fakhrul, Abbas, Goyeswar, Khokon, Aman and 27 others in connection with the case.

Police on April 29 last year pressed charges against six people. The IO in his probe report said the charges brought against the 26 accused were found "not proved".

Yesterday, the court took into cognisance the charges against six alliance activists for their alleged involvement in the incident.

PM may write

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implementation of a comprehensive work plan for achieving visible improvement.

The sources said the prime minister in the letter to her British counterpart will elaborate on already implemented measures to improve the security.

It will also highlight ongoing projects regarding recruitment of skilled manpower, improved training and purchase of scanning and other sophisticated equipment to ensure complete security in line with the international standards.

There will be a detailed description about the government work plan to improve security and all the other aspects including immigration, customs and cargo handling.

Diplomatic sources said Hasina will mention her government's "zero tolerance" policy on terrorism and the achievements in recent years in curbing religious extremism and militancy.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, an official of the civil aviation ministry said the government has taken up a well-articulated plan and all are working relentlessly to implement it in the next three weeks.

A foreign team that visited Bangladesh has appreciated the security improvement but noticed some human errors like an on-duty official went for smoking or fell asleep on the desk, he said.

"We are confident of overcoming those minor gaps soon," he said, adding that a British team will visit Bangladesh from March 13 to see the improvement. "We will show them the improvement and discuss the remaining tasks to be done in the next three weeks."

Meanwhile, US Ambassador in Dhaka Marcia Bernicat yesterday met Foreign Secretary Md Shahidul Haque and discussed a wide range of issues. But the airport security came up prominently.

She also discussed the visit of two US teams later this month -- Homeland Security team and cyber security expert team.

The teams will hold extensive meetings with high government and security officials, including the foreign secretary.

Dhaka has welcomed the planned visit of the two US teams.

Alan Bersin, US assistant secretary for international affairs and Chief diplomatic officer for the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Policy, will visit Bangladesh towards the end of this month.

The cyber security expert team of the US State Department will arrive on a two-day visit on March 22-23. It will be led by Tom Dukes, deputy coordinator for Cyber Issues at the US State Department.

Foreign ministry sources said several other US teams will visit Bangladesh next month.

Ninth grade salaries

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scale). "We have made a change here." Now, all first class officers holding the entry post will get their salaries as per the ninth grade, said Finance Secretary Mahbub Ahmed.

He said the committee also decided that 50 percent of the total number of professors at government colleges would be promoted to the grade three, instead of getting selection grade.

The professors were grade-4 officers in the seventh pay scale and around 50 percent of them could retire as grade three officers by getting selection grade. But the scope was scrapped in the eighth pay scale.

The committee also decided to invite representatives of public university teachers in its next meeting.

On the issue, Muhiith said there were some questions over the pay scale of the teachers and that they had an extensive discussion on the issue yesterday.

He claimed that three members of the committee had already sat with the teachers and they had "reached a point".

"...but we cannot say that we have completely resolved a problem on one issue," he said.

"That's why we have decided to invite four to five leaders of the feder-

ation for discussions. We will give our decision later."

Teachers of 37 public universities under the banner of Federation of Bangladesh University Teachers' Association (FBUTA) began their movement in May last year, demanding revision of the eighth pay scale and a separate salary structure for them.

They went on indefinite work abstention on January 11, but postponed it on January 19 following Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's assurance of dealing with their demands.

4 'robbers'

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minutes until the robbers fell back and hid into deep jungle, he said.

Later, Rab men found the bodies of four "robbers" lying on the ground and took them to Sarankhola Police Station, Alam said.

The team, however, could not rescue any of the abducted fishermen.

Local fishermen identified the four as members of Nayan Bahini.

Rab claimed to have recovered 18 firearms, including two double-barrel and four single-barrel guns, four sawed rifles and two air guns, 582 bullets, five sharp weapons and three cell phones from the scene.

Wounded Tigers

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of paramount importance in the context of what transpired in the last 24 hours after their nery eight-run win against the Netherlands at the same venue on Wednesday.

The Irish are a tough opposition to beat. Although Bangladesh enjoy a 3-1 head-to-head lead against them in this format, the Tigers won their last two games in Belfast in 2012 in the very last over.

But the Tigers have more pressing issues in hand to confront. Their inspirational skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, whose one important over virtually won them the game against the Netherlands, is nursing a swollen right wrist and thumb. He was actually not even able to flex his right thumb while having his lunch at the cafeteria of the Pavilion Hotel on Thursday. Mashrafe sustained the bruise while trying to stop a straight drive in the first match.

All-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, who sustained heavy bruising on his groin during the Asia Cup, is still recovering from that painful blow. Young Mustafizur Rahman is still nursing his side strain and according to coach Chandika Hathurusingha he was still not 100 per cent fit. Besides, Taskin Ahmed, who has been seamless with the ball for the last six games, will certainly feel the pinch while bowling in the match.

The biggest concern for the Tigers is that they will be playing their first game under lights at a venue where wickets behave a bit differently at night.

"It will be very important for us to win the toss tomorrow [today]. The wicket is not only two-paced but

becomes a bit more difficult to bowl on in the second half due to the heavy dew. We have seen the last game between Oman and Ireland last night [Wednesday] where the bowlers struggled to grip the ball at the death. So, it will be important to win the toss and bowl first," said Mashrafe to two reporters at the team hotel yesterday.

He also had his arguments for bowling first.

"When you bowl first it's difficult for the opponent to score runs in the first six overs. So, in a 20-over game you have little to do with those remaining 15 overs," he said, adding that he would have to overcome yet another pain barrier today.

While Mashrafe focused on the wicket, his coach Hathurusingha wanted to weed out those fielding lapses, such as Nasir Hossain dropping Netherlands skipper on Wednesday.

"If you drop a catch, it's always a concern. If he is a good player it hurts. I think we are trying very hard. So, there are some areas which we still need to improve. We are winning matches despite those slips, that's the good thing," said the coach.

He also wanted his batting to click against Ireland, who suffered a stunning two-wicket loss to Oman on Wednesday.

"I know Ireland are a professional team, although they had a bit of hiccup yesterday [Wednesday]. In T20 cricket you can't predict. Anything can happen, one over can change the game. So we expect everyone to do their best. Perform to our potential. I think if we play to our potential I expect us to win the game," said the coach.

Suu Kyi won't

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implementing the desires and expectations of voters who enthusiastically supported the NLD," Suu Kyi said in a statement published on her party website early yesterday.

She is barred by a charter clause that disqualifies anyone with close foreign relatives. Her late husband and two sons are British.

Even Suu Kyi's own MPs had been kept in the dark about the presidential deliberations, with the party fearful of upsetting a delicate political transition in a nation where the military still casts a long shadow.

The NLD also nominated ethnic Chin MP Henry Van Thu, a law graduate, as a presidential candidate from the upper house. He is expected to become vice president.

Htin Kyaw's official confirmation may take days.

Three candidates will be put to a vote of the combined houses -- one each from the upper house, lower house and from the military's parliamentary bloc, which represents a quarter of the legislature.

A final vote of the combined houses, in which the NLD has a majority, will then determine which will become the president, leaving the other two as vice presidents.

RULING TOGETHER
Myanmar's democracy movement runs through the family blood of Htin Kyaw, an affable former university teacher.

His father was a legendary writer and early member of the NLD and he is married to sitting NLD MP Su Su Lwin, whose late father was the party's respected spokesman.

Neither Htin Kyaw nor his wife attended the parliament yesterday. Online comments reacting to the announcement were generally positive.

HC verdict

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nine SC lawyers, including Asaduzzaman Siddique, Aklas Uddin Bhuiyan and Sarwar Ahad Chowdhury, filed the writ petition, saying the amendment might curb the independence of the judiciary.

The petitioners said the amendment might have been motivated from a "malafide" intention and the judges might feel at risk before passing an order against a lawmaker.

Four days later, the HC issued a rule upon the government asking it why the amendment should not be declared unconstitutional and annulled.

The three-member HC bench started hearing on the rule on May 21 last year and heard expert opinions from five amici curiae (friends of court), including eminent jurist Dr Kamal Hossain, on the issue. The four other amici curiae are Mahmudul Islam, now deceased, M Amir-Ul Islam, Rakanuddin Mahmud, and Ajmalul Hossain QC.

Dr Kamal, a framer of the constitution, told the HC in August last year the 16th amendment that re-empowered parliament to impeach SC judges affects the independence of the judiciary.

During yesterday's hearing, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam placed arguments before the HC, opposing the writ petition.

He said the 15th and 16th amendments aimed at cancelling the constitutional changes that were made by the martial law proclamations and restoring the original constitution of 1972.

The attorney general also said a law would be formulated determining the procedure for the removal of SC judges, and such writ petitions (challenging the amendment) was not acceptable before its formulation.

On the other hand, petitioners' lawyer Manzill Murshid said the 16th amendment changed the "basic structure of the constitution".

26 more

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daughters as well. I did not find good husbands for them. I had two marry them to men who do not even have their own place to stay," she added.

Mofazzal Hossain, a freedom fighter himself, is a cousin of Birangana Safura, aged around 60.

"We sought help from the government for Safura quite a few times but nothing happened. If she receives any help now, she will be able to live a better life at least before her death," he told The Daily Star.

On October 12, the government for the first time recognised 41 Biranganas as freedom fighters.

Initially, the government plans to recognise 81 Biranganas listed in the records of the Liberation War Museum. More war heroines would be given the recognition in phases.

Over 200 applications from the Biranganas are now under scrutiny of Jatiya Muktiyoddha Council, the central platform of the freedom fighters.

At least 1.62 lakh women were raped, and another 1.31 lakh Hindu women went missing during the Liberation War, according to the War Crimes Facts and Findings Committee led by Dr M Hassan. The Hindu women were believed to have been raped and killed in the Pakistan army camps.

The process of recognising the Biranganas as freedom fighters started following a High Court order on January 27, 2014.

It asked the government to explain why it should not be directed to upgrade the social status of the war heroines and to provide them with state honour and facilities like those of the freedom fighters.

Apart from Momena and Safura, the other 24 war heroines to get the freedom fighter status in the second phase are Rahima Khatun of Sharsha in Jessore; Nigar Sultana of Lohagora in Narail; Anowara Khatun of Fakirhat in Bagerhat; Masuda Khatun of Kumarkhali in Kushtia; Sitara Begum of Barguna; Asia Khatun and Mosammat Sona of Debhata in Satkhira; Kohinur Begum of Uzirpur in Barisal; Bela Rani Das of Muradnagar in Comilla; Joshna Begum, Laily Begum and Namita Rani Das of Fenchuganj in Sylhet; Riva Begum of Gopalganj; Ayesha Khatun, Sarfuli Begum and Bibi Hawa of Jhinaigati in Sherpur; Jobeda Bewa, Hasena Banu, Asiron Bewa and another Jobeda Bewa of Nalitabari in Sherpur; Amena Begum, Feroza Begum and Sheikh Fatema Ali of Savar in Dhaka; and Rajkumari Robidas Fulmoti of Sadullapur in Gaibandha.

Biman stands to lose most

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crore annually."

The official said 25 to 30 tonnes of cargo, mostly apparel and vegetables, is shipped in each of the flights to London.

If the UK banned direct passenger flights, the loss would be immense, the Biman official said.

Between 380 and 400 passengers fly Biman on its Dhaka-London and London-Dhaka return flights.

On Wednesday night, Acting Managing Director M M Asaduzzaman of Biman told The Daily Star that he could not immediately say how much Biman would lose.

The UK banned direct cargo from Dhaka to UK as their recent assessments of the Shahjalal International Airport found that some international security requirements were not being met. Australia, citing security concerns, imposed a blanket ban on air cargo from Bangladesh on December 19.

In the letter, Cameron said UK officials have been asked to work with Bangladesh officials to make a work plan. He also asked to start implementation of the plan by March 31 and if it was done, it would help Bangladesh avoid any further steps by the UK, an official at the civil aviation ministry said mentioning the letter.

The UK officials have mentioned that there are huge security gaps in the airport in their last assessment, the official said.

The UK government has taken the issue seriously following the recent terrorist attacks on planes in Egypt and Somalia. The letter also mentioned that there was a lack of trained security officials and proper monitoring at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, a source said.

The UK requested the prime minister to take necessary actions to ensure required skilled officials at the airport as per an international obligation.

Following the bombing and crash of a Russian jet over Egypt's Sinai desert in October, the UK Department for Transport made a list of 38 airports of 20 countries that have security lapses. The list includes Shahjalal International Airport.

Experts from the UK inspected the Dhaka airport in November and December last year and found serious security lapses and risks.

"Findings were horrible. Overall, the airport failed to meet the required security standards in 75 percent of the observations. In 25 percent of the observations, security standards were being consistently met," said a report prepared by the UK expert after the follow-up visit in December.

The team expressed serious concern about cargo screening and handling at the airport.

Biman is solely responsible for cargo handling.

"In 80 percent of the observations, security measures were not complied," the report mentioned.

The Daily Star has obtained a copy of the report.

REPORT FINDINGS

The UK report observed that supervision was either totally absent or

ineffective at the Dhaka airport.

There was ineffective access control into the terminal building and poor management of queues resulted in large numbers of people presenting a potential target for a landslide attack.

The passenger and staff screening process for access to the terminal was ineffective with the scanner not focussed on the task and very few bag searches being made. Body searches were consistently poor, the report said.

Similar poor standards of screening of passengers and cabin bags were observed at the gates.

The application of ETD (explosives trace detection) as an additional gate was not particularly effective, it went on to say.

The hold baggage scanner was not focussed on the task and bags did not appear to be adequately protected within the baggage make up area.

Staff screening standards at the access points of commercially important person and very important person was poor.

THE RESULT

Following the report, the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab) made a temporary force of 250 people drawn from the Air force, Armed Police Battalion and Ansar.

Caab officials were being trained by the UK and other foreign experts.

Rab and BGB deployed dog squads at the three international airports.

The Caab is strictly controlling access of people to the airport, which unfortunately has been causing sufferings to passengers. People had to stand in long queues for a long time as there was a shortage of scanners and manpower. Passengers and their bags were strictly scanned using the available screeners.

The Ecneec recently approved a Tk 89.55 crore project to purchase necessary scanners, explosive detectors, and equipment for the three international airports in the country.

Caab Chairman M Sanaul Haque recently told The Daily Star that the UK team was satisfied with the way Caab staff had been working to ensure security at the Shahjalal International Airport. "They are satisfied with our work, but they are still apprehensive weather our work would be sustainable," he said.

UK OFFICIALS ARRIVE SUNDAY

The aviation security experts from the UK will have a meeting with the Bangladesh government to see the work plan and its implementation.

"We'll place our plan before the team, narrate what so far has been done and ask if they have any further security requirements," said a top official of the civil aviation ministry yesterday.

The civil aviation ministry in a press release yesterday said the ban on direct cargo from Dhaka to London was unfortunate since the British High Commission had earlier expressed satisfaction over the steps taken by Bangladesh to ensure security at the airport.

The UK officials will arrive on Sunday.

The bird land

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November to April. The newly emerging silt and sludge attract ducks, geese, storks and even raptors. These are all rather large and familiar birds, the population of which has been falling all over the world. Many of these birds have become very rare indeed in Bangladesh.

It is not clear why so many species of rare birds flock to this particular waterfront in Rajshahi and not elsewhere. We guess that, in spite of endless plundering, this place still retains enough natural properties to support these birds. An Asian Woolly-neck stork has been the rarest bird recently spotted there. Even for a stork, the bird is really big, robust and a bit bizarre. The stunning red eyes, black eye-lashes and fluffy white neck easily distinguish it from other storks. An unearthly vermilion wash on the blackish back, wings and the tip of the bill make it look like a painting of the most fanciful artist. It is a globally vulnerable bird and, not surprisingly, very rarely seen in Bangladesh.

Besides the Woolly-neck stork, the bird-lovers of Rajshahi have recently found two equally rare birds here, the Black-necked Stork and the Painted Stork. In Bangladesh, these storks have only been infrequently spotted in far-off places like the haors and the coastal islands. It is a rare treat to see these gems at a riverbank by the crowded Rajshahi city. For several years the riverbank has been famous for frequent visitations by Black Storks in winter. It has also been inhabited by the Asian Openbill, the only stork perennially living in Rajshahi district. This winter, therefore, the tally of storks seen in Rajshahi has risen to five species, an extraordinary assemblage of storks never witnessed anywhere in

Bangladesh before.

With so many celebrity-storks at the riverbank, the other dazzling visitors like the Bar-headed Goose, Ruddy Shelducks, Red-crested Pochards, Booted Eagles, Long-legged Buzzards etc. have been reduced to mere footnotes. Otherwise, any one of these elegant birds could rightly have attracted the attention of bird-lovers of the country. Majher Char has already been famous as the only site in Bangladesh where two species of the Thick-knees occur, namely the Great Thick-knee and the Indian Thick-knee. A small band of bird-researchers have recently ringed a very rare Spotted Bush Warbler here and reported sighting of an unidentified francolin which is assumed to be either Grey Francolin or Swamp Francolin, both considered extirpated in Bangladesh since the middle of the 20th century.

The administration as well as the civil society of Rajshahi city had been quite unaware of this unique bird-land and unmindful of the need to conserve any natural endowments at all. A part of Majher Char and adjacent islands are cultivated by poor farmers and the natural vegetation of the rest is cut, crushed or burned at will by assorted pillagers. The site has clearly been left to the mercy of the squatters, the scavengers and the plain greedy people. Very recently a few amateur bird-photographers of the city have turned the spotlight on this place by posting photographs of rare birds in the social media. A place where five species of storks care to stroll will be considered well worth conserving anywhere in the world. In Bangladesh, it cries out for immediate steps for protection against degradation and rehabilitation of some of the lost natural properties.