

Myanmar team arrives today

To discuss Rohingya issue with Bangladesh officials, visit Cox's Bazar

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A three-member Myanmar delegation of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State arrives in Dhaka today to hold discussions with Bangladesh authorities over the Rohingya issue.

The delegation will also visit shelters where Rohingyas from Myanmar took shelter to escape a "counter-insurgency operation" in the country by its military.

Diplomatic sources said the delegation, during its four-day stay in Bangladesh, would visit two Rohingya shelters in Cox's Bazar to witness the plight of 65,000 Rohingya refugees who entered Bangladesh recently and joined thousands of others who had done the same years ago.

The Myanmar government established the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, also known as Rakhine Commission, to discover lasting solutions to complex and delicate issues in the Rakhine State.

In another development, sources at the foreign ministry and the UN office in Dhaka said the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee

Lee, will arrive in Bangladesh near the end of February to visit shelters in Bangladesh where the Myanmar nationals took shelter amid persecution, killing, rape and ethnic cleansing in their homeland.

The nine-member Advisory Commission, composed of three international and six national persons of eminence, is Myanmar's national initiative to resolve protracted issues in the region. The commission is chaired by former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan.

According to the foreign ministry sources, the delegation members are Win Mra, chair of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission; Aye Lwin, core member and founder of Religious for Peace Myanmar; and Ghassan Salame, former Lebanese minister of culture (2000-2003) and UN special advisor to the secretary-general (2003-2006).

The delegation will also hold talks with government officials to discuss enduring solutions to the longstanding issues in Rakhine state of Myanmar.

During the meetings, Bangladesh will ask Myanmar to take back all

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Illegal shops built on the Buriganga river bank between Sadarghat and Shyambazar in the capital are now gone following steps by the BIWTA. Inset, the illegal shops were occupying the place a few days ago.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Stand released!

Barapukuria plant MD faces the music for forcing staff to take oath on scriptures

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

The managing director of Barapukuria Coal Mining Company Ltd (BCMCL) in Dinajpur has been stand released for allegedly forcing the officials to take oath holding religious scriptures that they would not to speak about his corruption allegations.

Petrobangla, the parent organisation of BCMCL, in an office order issued on Thursday stand-released SM Nurul Aurangajeb and appointed Habib Uddin Ahmed as the MD of the company.

The letter was signed by Mostafa Kamal, director (admin) of Petrobangla.

BCMCL officials said there were many allegations of corruption against Aurangajeb.

Habib Uddin, general manager (marketing), would take charge of the office on Sunday, Shafiqul Alam, general manager (admin) of BCMCL, told The Daily Star over the phone yesterday.

BCMCL officials on January 19 sent a letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, stating corruption and nepotism by Aurangajeb. They also demanded his immediate withdrawal.

On January 22 and 23, Aurangajeb forced more than 100 officials at coalmine complex to take oath

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Farmers in pain as cartels gain

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pushes up their production cost, which in turn eats up their profit margin.

The BCIC only last year acknowledged the existence of these syndicates affecting price and ultimately the farmers, following an internal probe.

HOW THEY OPERATE

One of the two syndicates handles the papers and the other handles the transport.

The first one comprises only five persons, according to documents and sources.

The upazila agriculture officers make the estimate for fertiliser demand in their areas. The DC office approves the estimate and assigns demand orders (DO) to fertiliser dealers. Around 7,000 fertiliser dealers across the country are supposed to submit their DOs to the factories. But the dealers cannot do that.

This syndicate steps in at this stage. It buys the DOs from the dealers and even pays them Tk 100-150 per sack on top of the government fixed prices.

It then sells the DOs to the second syndicate, comprised of 70 people who are all transporters, at a profit.

The second syndicate then buys the fertilisers from the factories with the DOs, delivers those to dealers, and charges the dealers the transport cost and the extra money they had to pay the first syndicate for the DOs.

The dealers then sell the fertilisers to farmers jacking up the prices to cover the extra cost.

Even if a dealer went to the factory

directly to buy fertiliser with a DO, he or she would not be allowed to transport the fertiliser unless one of the 70 members of the second syndicate carried it, the sources said.

Yusuf Khan Mahub of Rubel and Brothers Ltd, Mizanur Rahman of Padma Transport Ltd, Jamal Uddin of Jamal Enterprise, Akram Haider of Sultana Traders, and Harunur Rashid Manna of Manna Enterprise are in the first syndicate.

Based in Majhirhat of Chittagong, they run their businesses using the names Bangladesh Fertiliser Association (BFA), Chittagong district unit; Cooperatives Trading Corporation (Pvt) Ltd; and Majhirhat Fertiliser Transport Contractors Welfare Association.

These five control the fertiliser dealers across the country with the help of some top officials of the TSP Complex Ltd and DAP Fertiliser Factory, the two BCIC factories in Chittagong, according to sources.

The Daily Star was able to reach four of the five companies, the owners of which are involved in the first syndicate, for comments.

All of them claimed that they were not members of any syndicate and that they were merely service providers.

They said they get the DOs from dealers via mail and they send their representatives to submit the DOs to the factories. They then receive the fertiliser, ship it and get a service charge.

"It is a baseless allegation. There is no such syndicate here," said Akram

Haider, owner of Sultana Traders.

He said, "As it is neither possible nor economically viable for the dealers to go to distant places to get fertiliser, they send their DO letters to us through courier. We submit the DO letters to the factories, receive the consignment and send the fertiliser accordingly. We get only Tk 400 to 500 per tonne [20 sacks] in commission for the work," he said.

Rejaul Karim, manager of Jamal Enterprise, said transport agents only work as representatives of the fertiliser dealers.

Masud Parvez Manik, manager of Rubel and Brothers, said that out of jealousy some people were making the allegation that they were running a syndicate.

Harunur Rashid Manna, owner of Manna Enterprise, also was of the same opinion.

Meanwhile, dealers say that it does not make sense for them to go all the way to Chittagong to get their allocation. "We collect TSP and DAP through representatives in Chittagong," BCIC dealer Nazrul Islam Swapan of Noakhali told The Daily Star.

"Our representatives get the fertiliser and ship it to us," he said, adding that they have to do this as they only get allocation for one tonne of fertiliser at best and that it was not worth going to Chittagong to get it.

Swapan said on an average they buy a sack of TSP and DAP for Tk 1,470 and Tk 1,550 and sell those to farmers with a profit of Tk 40-100.

Dealers say this could be avoided if the

fertiliser were handled by the BCIC itself. Zillur Rahman Raju, president of Gaibandha BFA, said, "If the fertiliser was distributed from the BCIC warehouses, we could have gotten out of this and the farmers would pay a lower price."

BCIC PROBE

The BCIC had formed a probe committee, led by its finance director Md Haiul Kaium, to find the syndicates that way.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of the probe report submitted in February last year, which also made some recommendations on what the BCIC should do about the syndicates.

Member of the second syndicate and owner of Siddique Enterprise Osman Gani Ripon had told the probe body that alongside his transport business, he got involved with "the illegal fertiliser syndicate and business".

In his written statement to the probe body, he said a syndicate operates using the names of three organisations (mentioned above) and elaborated how the five people buy DOs and sell those to the second syndicate.

Almost all other persons interviewed for the probe told the investigators they knew about the syndicates.

The probe body recommended that a command area could be built for distributing TSP and DAP from BCIC warehouses, like the distribution of urea.

It also recommended increasing allocation for dealers, regular monitoring of non-urea fertiliser distribution, and following investigation, transfer of officials and staff involved in cor-

ruption.

Managing directors of the TSP and the DAP factories should be censured for their negligence in duty, the probe body said, adding that their claimed ignorance of existence of the syndicates was not acceptable.

Amal Kanti Barua, managing director of DAP Fertiliser Company Ltd, Rangadia, Chittagong, told The Daily Star that there was no negligence in duty on their part.

He said he did not know about the syndicates since it was a matter outside his factory.

The BCIC sent a letter to the agriculture ministry in February last year as to whether funds could be managed for the transportation of TSP and DAP to the BCIC warehouses in different districts.

In response, the ministry advised the BCIC to contact the finance ministry for fund allocation but the BCIC did follow through with the finance ministry and the syndicates remain untouched.

BCIC Chairman Mohammad Iqbal told The Daily Star that they are aware of the syndicates and that the process to get rid of the syndicates was on. He said the police station and the district administration had been informed about the syndicates and asked to act.

"Two officers of the relevant factories have been transferred," he said, adding that there was no evidence of others' involvement.

"But we can't dismantle the syndicate overnight as fertiliser distribution is involved. We are working on it."

Went for better life

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"Why should my daughter commit suicide? I don't believe it," said Mariam, adding, Khoko had shown no such signs while talking to her the day before.

The employer was Mohammed Khalfan Khamis Al Hanai, according to the death certificate sent with the body. He could not be reached for comment.

Mariam said she could not file a case and get an autopsy done as Motijheel and Paltan police sought travel documents that Khoko had carried with her.

This allegation cannot be verified as she could not name the person she contacted, police said.

Khoko was buried in her Cazaria hometown on January 18, the day the body arrived.

Two days later, Labour Counsellor at the Bangladesh Embassy in Muscat Zahed Ahmed told The Daily Star by phone that the embassy had sought an autopsy report and engaged a law firm to find out the cause of the death.

The embassy had not been informed of the abuse, he said. "We could have rescued her."

Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program Executive Director Shakirul Islam said relatives of domestic workers in Gulf countries frequently made complaints of abuse, not of suicide.

The organisation recorded 125 complaints in the last five months concerning workers from seven districts, he added.

Oman hosts about seven lakh Bangladeshis, including 30,000 female domestic workers.

Since 1991, more than 5.5 lakh women have gone abroad for jobs, mostly as domestic workers. The annual average in the last two years stands at about one lakh, up from just 2,000 in 1991.

Rights bodies say female domestic workers are more vulnerable to abuse while protective measures put in place by the Bangladeshi authorities are not adequate.

Trump hosts UK PM as first foreign leader

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May told the news conference she believed sanctions against Russia should stay in place until Moscow fulfilled its obligations under the Minsk agreement.

She also made a point of emphasising that during their talks, Trump had given strong backing to Nato, an alliance that the president has previously called obsolete.

Putin and Trump are likely to discuss the sanctions when the two leaders speak by telephone today, a senior White House aide said.

TELEPHONE DIPLOMACY

AFP reports: White House spokesman Sean Spicer had earlier announced on Twitter that Trump plans to talk to Putin, France's President Francois Hollande and Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel over the weekend.

France and Germany brokered the Minsk Agreement between Russia and Ukraine and have been pressuring both sides to live up to it.

Appearing on Fox News, Trump's senior advisor Kellyanne Conway said the new commander-in-chief was indeed considering lifting sanctions on Russia.

"All of that is under consideration," she said.

"If another nation that has considerable resources wishes to join together with the United States of America to try to defeat and eradicate radical Islamic terrorism, then we're listening."

In Moscow, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Putin would congratulate Trump on his inauguration.

But he refused to comment on rumours that Trump might already be gearing up to roll back the measures that have helped drive ties to their lowest



US President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Theresa May smile as they hold a joint news conference at the White House.

PHOTO: REUTERS

point since the end of the Cold War.

"This is the first contact by phone since President Trump assumed office so it is hardly likely there will be substantive contact on all issues. Let's be patient," Peskov said.

On Thursday, in a speech to US Republican lawmakers, May had suggested Washington engage Putin but be wary of him.

Trump has sparked concerns among Washington's European allies and foreign policy hawks at home by repeatedly declaring his desire to forge closer ties with Moscow.

He won the presidency amid

charges that Russia interfered in last year's election on his behalf, in part by hacking the emails of top officials in his rival Hillary Clinton's campaign.

'MURDERER AND THUG'

Republicans in Congress have warned against softening Washington's stance on Putin.

"He should remember that the man on the other end of the line is a murderer and a thug who seeks to undermine American national security interests at every turn," Senator John McCain said.

Of talk of lifting the sanctions, McCain said: "I hope President Trump will put an end to this speculation and

reject such a reckless course.

"If he does not, I will work with my colleagues to codify sanctions against Russia into law," he added.

The Trump-Putin call will be their first official contact since the Republican took office a week ago.

The pair spoke by telephone in November, shortly after Trump's election victory and, according to the Kremlin, "declared the need for active joint work to normalise" ties.

Railway staffer

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Suddenly, a woman and the girl, aged around five, appeared there, and tried to cross a track. A train was approaching fast at that time.



Badal Mia

The two were taking more than the usual time to go to other side of the track. Sensing danger, an unknown man, who was standing nearby, pushed them from behind. At this, they fell on the ground in the middle of two railway lines.

However, the girl stood up, and probably baffled by the incident, walked in on the track again, said Sohel.

"Everyone shouted and asked the girl to go back but she just stood right in the middle of the track," he said.

Suddenly, Badal jumped in and showed her out of the track. But this valiant effort cost him his life as he himself was hit by the train, Sohel said, adding that he died on the spot after being run over by the train.

There is no railway crossing in that area, but many cross the tracks to go to the other side, ignoring the risks, said locals.

Badal, who was from Mymensingh, along with his family was about to shift to a quarter near the cantonment railway station in this February. He had got the quarter recently after his service at the railway for more than 18 years, said his brother Siddiqui Rahman.

Siddiqui said Badal was the only earning member of his family. He has left behind five sons and three daughters.

Yasin Faruque, officer-in-charge of Dhaka Railway Police Station, said an unnatural death case was filed over the incident. Badal's remains were sent to the Dhaka Medical College morgue for an autopsy.