

HC verdict in 7-murder case tomorrow

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court is set to deliver its verdict on the death references and appeals in the sensational Narayanganj seven-murder cases tomorrow.

The bench of Justice Bhabani Prasad Singha and Justice Mustafa Zaman Islam will deliver the verdict as the items are the first in its cause list for tomorrow.

On July 26, the judges fixed the day for announcing the judgment after hearing arguments from the state and the defence counsels on 33 dates.

If a lower court sentences a person to death, the judgment is examined by the HC through hearing arguments for confirming the sentence.

During the hearing on the death references and appeals in Narayanganj seven murder cases, Attorney General Mahbub Alam prayed to the HC to uphold the trial court verdict, in which 26 people, including 16 former Rapid Action Battalion members, were sentenced to death and nine others jailed.

Defence counsels -- Advocate Munsurul Hoque Chowdhury, Advocate SM Shahjahan, Advocate SM Abdul Mobin and Advocate Ahsan Ullah -- argued defending the accused.

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India plans

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report from New Delhi.

"More clarity will emerge at an appropriate time," added the official.

However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dhaka is totally unaware about any such talks with Bangladesh.

In fact, India didn't want to get involved in the Rohingya issue when Bangladesh requested, a highly placed source at the foreign ministry told The Daily Star yesterday.

"I have no idea whether Indians have changed their position and are engaging with Bangladesh on Rohingya issue," said another high official at the foreign ministry.

Contacted, a senior official, who is the focal point on the Rohingya issue at the foreign ministry, expressed his total ignorance about whether India was in talks with Bangladesh on this or planning to deport thousands of the Myanmar Muslims.

"I give you my 100 percent assurance that this has not come up to my level. I have no idea at which level the India held talks with Bangladesh," the official said.

Reuters reported yesterday that Junior Interior Minister Kiren Rijiju told parliament on Wednesday the federal government had directed state governments to "constitute taskforces at district levels to identify and deport the illegally staying foreign nationals".

Rijiju was in Myanmar recently to attend an event, although it was not clear if he discussed the Rohingya issue.

Officials in Myanmar could not be contacted immediately for comment.

Rohingya refugees have been a big headache for Bangladesh as the country has been hosting 3,00,000 to 5,00,000 of them for over three decades. After the latest crackdown began on October 9, 2016, some 75,000 new members of the Myanmar Muslims entered Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Myanmar's government already denies full citizenship to the 1.1 million-strong Rohingya population that lives in Rakhine state, branding them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. This is while the Rohingya track their ancestors many generations back in Myanmar.

UN human rights and refugee agencies, Kofi Annan-led Rakhine Commission, UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee and many other human rights groups have repeatedly been urging Myanmar to take back Rohingyas. But all such international calls fell on deaf ears.

Considered by the UN as the "most persecuted minority group in the world," the Rohingyas have been under a military siege in Myanmar's western state of Rakhine since October 2016. The government used a militant attack on border guards back then as the pretext to enforce the siege.

There have been numerous eyewitness accounts of summary executions, rapes, and arson attacks by security forces against the Muslims since the crackdown began.

Amnesty International has said deporting and abandoning the Rohingyas would be "unconscionable".



Hajj pilgrims wait outside the terminal as a fire breaks out at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Fire disrupts operations for 3 hours

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international airport of the country.

People were allowed in the terminals at 4:05pm, said witnesses. Caab officials said they started check-ins around 5:30pm.

Documents, furniture and office equipment in three rooms were burnt, said Major Shakil Newaj Bhuiyan, director (operations) of Fire Service and Civil Defense.

The building was engulfed in smoke and the smell of burning was

felt outside, said fire fighters.

Director of the airport, Kazi Iqbal Karim said no major damage was incurred.

Major Shakil said 10 units of firefighters rushed to the scene and doused the fire at 3:05pm.

He added that firefighters asked authorities to snap electricity supply to the airport as soon as they reached there. The supply resumed after 3:00pm.

A three-member probe committee headed by a fire service Deputy Director

Debashish Bardhan was formed to find the cause of the fire and asked to submit its report in seven working days.

Caab also formed a five-member committee headed by its director (operations) Saiful Islam to investigate into the incident.

The committee includes two officials from Directorate General of Forces Intelligence and National Security Intelligence.

Mahbubul Alam, a pilgrim, who entered the terminal building around

1:00pm, said he along with several others was waiting on the first floor when Caab security guards asked them to go out of the building with their luggage right away.

Vehicles, that couldn't enter the airport in the afternoon, caused a long tailback on Airport Road.

Commuters suffered as the road from Khilkhet to Airport intersection was jammed for several hours. Thousands of people were subjected to the tailbacks.

Hard times for elephants

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DoF data show as many as 227 people and 63 elephants got killed in the conflict in 13 years since 2003. Sixteen people and four elephants were killed while 20 other people were injured in last year alone.

The first ever comprehensive study on elephants in Bangladesh since the Liberation War also found 457 elephants in the country's forests and 57 elephants crossing trans-boundary points.

The elephant population of Bangladesh was investigated from August 2013 to April 2016.

Currently, there are 268 resident wild, 93 migratory and 96 captive elephants in the country, it said.

The study citing a previous report said about 100 years ago elephants were apparently seen in most of the forests of Bangladesh.

"From field observations it was found that food shortage, habitat loss and fragmentation, and direct killing of elephants are the main threats to elephants in Bangladesh."

"Human-elephant conflict has been on the rise because of human intervention in the elephant corridors. Elephant habitat has also been destroyed over the times," Abdul Motaleb, one of the authors of the study, told The Daily Star.

There are 12 internal corridors and among them, five were about to close and all the trans-boundary corridors had been closed earlier, he said.

The study was conducted in all the elephant ranges of Bangladesh and nine forest divisions were investigated for estimating the resident and migratory elephant populations.

Human settlements, agricultural lands, roads and highways, brick fields, and village markets were constructed within or near the elephant movement routes and corridors, which fuelled the elephant-human conflict in the country, it said.

The study also identified 12 elephant corridors that were used by the wild elephants to pass from one

habitat to another -- among them five were almost closed due to human intervention and the rest were also under severe threat.

"The present condition of the corridors is not suitable for elephant movement due to human interventions. If this situation continues the corridors will be blocked gradually, resulting in the elephants being pocketised and loss of their genetic viability, which would ultimately lead to extinction of this species," the study said.

It added, "Elephants always follow their fixed routes and corridors during movement and construction of infrastructures have largely affected their mobility. Because of huge dietary requirements, elephants extensively search for food, water, and shelter within a particular habitat or other habitats."

During the 2nd Indo-Bangladesh Dialogue on Trans-Boundary Conservation of Elephants held in India's Shillong in late July, both the countries agreed to ensure safe pas-

sage for the animal.

Jahidul Kabir, conservator of forests (wildlife and nature conservation circle), said, "There are a number of pocket gates for elephant movement. We have urged our counterpart to keep the corridors open round the clock."

"Border Security Force has raised objections but the Indian authorities said they will talk to the high officials in this regard."

He also said both the sides discussed developing elephant habitat and not to build any electric fence in the natural migration corridors.

"All these issues were drafted, if our home ministry and foreign ministry agreed, we will finalise the draft," he said, adding, protecting elephants was the both sides' top priority.

Mohammad Sultan Ahmed, assistant wildlife biologist of IUCN Bangladesh office, said, "Elephant habitat should be protected to preserve elephants in Bangladesh. If their habitat is protected, the number of the animal would increase."

Siddiquir back home

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said he did not want to be anyone's burden. "I want to continue my studies and get my certificates. I want a respectable position," he added.

Siddiquir, whose eyes were damaged in police action in Shahbagh on July 20, cannot see with his right eye. He perceived little light after the bandage of his left eye was removed on August 5 after a surgery at Sankara Nethralaya in India's Chennai, according to doctors.

Siddiquir along with his brother Nayeib Ali and Zahidul Ahsan Menon, assistant professor at the National Institute of Ophthalmology (NIO) in Dhaka, who were accompanying him at the Indian hospital, reached the airport around 3:10pm.

Talking to reporters, Zahidul said there was a "little hope" of Siddiquir's left eyesight recovery. "But we have to wait for six weeks to know his visual outcome."

Siddiquir, a third-year student of political science, was taken to Chennai on July 27. The government is bearing all his medical costs.

From the airport, Siddiquir was taken to the NIO.

Meanwhile, wearing blindfolds, around 100 students of the seven colleges formed a human chain outside the terminal-1 of the airport. They demanded that the culprit policeman be brought to book.

They also announced that they would form a human chain in front of the Jatiya Press Club tomorrow to press home their demands, including punishment of the guilty policemen and withdrawal of the

"attempt to murder" case filed against 1,200 unnamed students.

On July 20, students of the seven DU affiliated colleges -- Dhaka College, Eden Mohila College, Government Shaheed Suhrawardy College, Kabi Nazrul Government College, Begum Badrunnesa Government Mohila College, Mirpur Government Bangla College and Government Titumir College -- were demonstrating at Shahbagh to press for their seven-point demand that include announcement of their exam dates.

To investigate the incident, police formed two probe committees, of which a committee of Dhaka Metropolitan Police headed by Mir Rezaul Alam, joint commissioner (Operations) of DMP, submitted its report on August 7.

It found that a constable from Public Order Management of police fired the shell "intentionally or unintentionally" pointing at the crowd instead of pointing 45 degrees upwards as per the rule, while police officers, including the ones from Shahbagh Police Station, were held responsible for not briefing the subordinates properly, said a source of DMP close to the probe body.

The other committee by Ramna police is yet to submit its report.

Police earlier claimed that Siddiquir might have got the eye injuries by being hit by a flower vase or brickbats.

The claim sparked a huge outcry on social media as a video footage showed a policeman shooting a teargas canister directly at agitating students, causing Siddiquir to collapse.

'Locked and loaded'

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the first step toward cooling tensions.

"When a fight has nearly broken out, the first step away from the dangerous threshold should be taken by the side that is stronger and smarter," Lavrov said.

Beijing has repeatedly pushed resuming long-dormant six-party talks to peacefully resolve the mounting tensions, but its position has been overshadowed by Trump and Kim's emerging game of brinkmanship.

China's proposal for North Korea to halt its weapons programs in exchange for a suspension of military drills by the United States and South Korea -- seen by Pyongyang as provocative -- has essentially been ignored.

Trump has progressively ramped up the tone throughout the week -- after brandishing a threat of unleashing "fire and fury" on North Korea, he said Thursday maybe that statement "wasn't tough enough."

He warned Pyongyang it should be "very, very nervous" of the consequences if it even thinks of attacking US soil, after Kim's regime said it was readying plans to launch missiles towards the US Pacific territory of Guam.

Trump also called on China to "do a lot more" to heap pressure on Kim.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel joined the intensifying chorus of calls for restraint, saying diplomacy was the answer.

"Germany will very intensively take part in the options for resolution that are not military but I consider a verbal escalation to be the wrong response,"

she said.

Nearly a week ago, the UN Security Council unanimously passed fresh sanctions against Pyongyang over its weapons program, including export bans, a new punishment that could cost North Korea \$1 billion a year.

US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis appeared intent Thursday on easing the tension, describing the prospect of war as "catastrophic" and saying diplomacy remained the priority.

Asked yesterday if Mattis was aware of Trump's latest tweet, spokesman Colonel Rob Manning simply said the Pentagon chief was "in close and constant contact with the president."

Concerning the prospect of forthcoming military action, Manning told AFP: "We maintain a high state of readiness to deal with the North Korean threat in conjunction with our allies and partners in the region."

A White House official noted: "There are military plans for just about any crisis we may face in the world. (...) This isn't anything new."

In China, the state-run Global Times yesterday said that Beijing should not intervene on Pyongyang's side if it triggered a conflict.

Beijing should "make clear that if North Korea launches missiles that threaten US soil first and the US retaliates, China will stay neutral," it said in an editorial.

Meanwhile in South Korea, calls mounted for Seoul to develop atomic weapons of its own, with the Korea Herald saying in an editorial: "Now is time to start reviewing nuclear armament."

MILITANCY LINKS

Bangladeshi held in Delhi

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Another Bangladeshi, believed to be a member of banned militant outfit Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), has been arrested in a joint drive in New Delhi of India.

The 25-year-old, Raja-ul-Ahmed, was detained by Delhi and West Bengal police on August 1. He was also wanted for his alleged involvement in the circulation of fake Indian currency.

Delhi police did not share details of the issue with the media.

Pramod Singh Kushwah, deputy commissioner of police at special cell of Delhi, said, "We got a tip-off from West Bengal police which had been tracking the accused. They gave us his location and he was nabbed by our team. He was subsequently shown arrested."

Raja will be handed over to West Bengal police once their team arrives in Delhi.

According to Indian police sources, Raja is an alleged member of ABT. He was questioned if he was in the Indian capital to carry out a terror act.

On August 6, another Bangladeshi "ABT man", Abdullah Al Mamon, was detained in Muzaffarnagar district of India's Uttar Pradesh.

According to a report of The Times of India, the CID says Abdullah has claimed that he had acted on instructions from Khairul Islam alias Fahim, a leader of intelligence wing of ABT. Khairul was arrested in July from Dhaka.

LGRD minister

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shown the audacity to insult Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the judgment.

"We most humbly and respectfully request you [Supreme Court judges] to review the unexpected issues in the verdict, as the people of Bangladesh don't want the judiciary to be harmed. The judiciary is people's last resort," said Mosharraf.

The LGRD minister also urged people to allow the Sheikh Hasina-led government to stay in power for two more terms for the development process to continue.

Noor-E-Alam Chowdhury, lawmaker from Madaripur-1, also spoke there. Earlier, the minister inaugurated a road named after Sheikh Hasina in Shibchar.

On Thursday, Law Minister Anisul Huq said the grounds on which the Supreme Court scrapped the 16th amendment to the constitution are unacceptable to the government.

He also claimed that the chief justice made derogatory comments on parliament and undermined it in the SC judgment.

"We have decided to make a move to get expunged the objectionable and irrelevant statements made by the chief justice in the judgment," he mentioned. The law minister came up with the government's formal reaction to the scrapping of the 16th amendment 10 days after the release of the full verdict.

Earlier on August 7, more than a dozen senior ministers criticised the SC judgment at the weekly cabinet meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the chair. The PM directed them to build public opinion against the "objectionable and irrelevant comments" in the verdict, according to meeting sources.

Yesterday, Jatiyatabadi Ainjibi Forum, a pro-BNP lawyers' platform demanded resignation and arrest of Law Commission Chairman ABM Khairul Haque for his comments on the verdict in the 16th amendment case and "breach of the code of conduct by holding a press conference".

The platform decided to hold protest programmes at all bars across the country tomorrow, Wednesday and Thursday to press home its demand.

Mahbub Uddin Khokon, secretary general of the forum, made the announcement at a press conference at the BNP's Nayapalton office in the capital.

The forum also demanded that the government publish a gazette notification on disciplinary rules for lower court judges.

Khokon, also joint secretary general of the BNP, said, "I am urging the lawyers, who believe in the rule of law, the constitution and democracy, to participate in the programmes."

He noted, "As the Law Commission chairman, he [Khairul] has to follow the code of conduct. He cannot hold any press conference. But he breached the code of conduct by holding a press conference."

"That is why the forum is demanding his resignation and arrest," Khokon added.

Meanwhile, Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader yesterday said it seemed that the BNP was thinking it reached close to power following the SC verdict.

"We have to stay ready. We have to fend off this evil force. We have to tackle their conspiracy taking people with us," Quader, also the road transport and bridges minister, told a meeting organised by Awami Swachhchasebak League on the occasion of the National Mourning Day in the capital's Dhanmondi.