

Myanmar's Suu Kyi says army admission on killings a positive step

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi said yesterday it was "positive" that the country's military was taking responsibility for the actions of troops, after the army said soldiers were involved in killing 10 captured Rohingya Muslims.

The military said in a statement on Wednesday that soldiers and Buddhist villagers had murdered 10 Muslim "terrorists" at a village in northern Rakhine State at the beginning of September and that action would be taken against those responsible.

Asked at a joint news conference with Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono about the rare admission of wrongdoing by the military, known as the Tatmadaw, Suu Kyi said: "The Tatmadaw investigated and will take necessary action on that."

"It is a new step for our country," she said, according to a transcript posted on her Facebook page. "I see it that way because a country needs to take responsibility for the rule of law in the country, and this is the first step on the road of taking responsibility and it is a positive thing."

Suu Kyi rarely speaks to the media and has said little in public about the crisis in

the western state. The army, which is not under the control of the civilian government, launched a sweeping counteroffensive in northern Rakhine in response to Rohingya militant attacks on August 25, triggering an exodus of more than 650,000 Rohingya villagers to Bangladesh.

Asked if the revelations about the killing at the village of Inn Din, about 50 km (30 miles) north of the state capital Sittwe, could be a concern for refugees who are being asked to return, Suu Kyi said: "Some people might be afraid, but this is not something that has happened right now."

"It was an investigation into a case that happened before. So doing this investigation is a deterrent so that similar cases don't happen later."

Suu Kyi was speaking following a meeting in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw at which Kono asked her to ensure the "safe and voluntary" resettlement of those who have fled, according to Japanese news agency Kyodo.

The Japanese foreign minister said Tokyo, one of Myanmar's biggest foreign aid donors, planned to give about \$20 million for humanitarian support to Rohingya refugees, subject to parliamentary approval, Kyodo said.

Brick kilns

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water bodies," said Aung Hla Ching Marma of Mong Ba Ching Para.

"They are also polluting the environment badly in the area, raising the risk of spread of different diseases," said U Mra Mong, headman of the area.

"Fertility of farmland around the brickfields where we cultivate crops is also going down," said the Marma villager.

Moreover, risks of accidents are rising due to increased movement of brick and earth-laden trucks on the only road, which is used by the villagers as well as school-going children, said Akhter Hossain, a three-wheeler driver of the area.

Faitong Union Parishad Chairman Md Jalal Uddin said, "What can I do? I am helpless as the kiln owners have managed the local administration."

"There are 22 illegal brick kilns in my union alone," he said.

Mid Nezamuddin, head teacher of Shivatoli Govt Primary School, which is adjacent to a brick kiln, said, "We have complained several times to the local administration in this regard in vain."

Contacted, Dilip Kumar Banik, deputy commissioner of the district, said, "We have tried several times to stop the illegal brick kilns but failed as most of the kilns are located in very remote areas."

Humayun Kabir and Gias Uddin, two brick kiln owners, have admitted brick manufacturing by using firewood in the dense forest areas.

These kilns use firewood collected from the forests, even from the reserve forests, to burn bricks, said Zumlian Amlai, chairperson (Bandarban chapter) of the Parbatya Chattagram Forest and Land Rights Protection. The situation is posing a serious threat to human health and environment, but the local administration has yet to take any noticeable action to check the menace, he alleged.

"No steps can be taken against these kilns as the local authorities are in favour of the owners," he said.

Local sources said about 55 kilns have started operation in Lama, Alikadom, Ruma, Naikongchhari and Sadar upazilas defying the environmental laws.



Standing on the veranda, some young men wait to go outside after yesterday's Rab raid in West Nakhhalpara area. They live just on the upper floor of the flat where three suspected militants were killed in the raid.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

3 militants killed in Rab operation

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room of the flat on December 28 for Tk 5,500 a month. He identified himself as Jahid, a worker at a ceramic factory in Tejgaon Industrial Area.

Rab suspects that he had faked his identity as it found copies of two different national ID cards with his photographs. In one ID, his name was mentioned as Jahid from Comilla and in the other as Sajib from Brahmanbaria.

Yesterday's raid was the first anti-militancy operation this year.

Since the July 1 Gulshan Café attack in 2016, law enforcers carried out at least 30 pre-emptive raids on militant dens where 80 militants were killed and many others arrested.

Yesterday's operation began around 2:00am with Rab members cordoning off the building. Getting no response from inside for about 30 minutes, they broke the collapsible gate of the main entrance and entered the building, Mufti Mahmud said.

Around 3:30am, the militants, who were in one of the three rooms in the flat, opened the door of their room

and threw a grenade at the Rab men.

They then opened fire on the Rab members, prompting the law enforcers to retaliate.

Two members of the elite force sustained minor injuries, he added.

The operation ended after a 30-minute gunfight between the militant suspects and the Rab personnel around 4:00am. But it took Rab around 11 hours to recover bombs and explosive materials, and collect evidence.

Two firearms, three suicide vests, three improvised explosive devices and some detonators were recovered from the hideout, said the elite force.

Rab picked up four persons, including the building's owner and Rubel, for quizzing.

Quoting Rubel, Mufti Mahmud said Jahid started staying in the flat on January 4 and the other two joined him four days later. They did not bring any furniture or household items.

Jahid used to go out every morning and return late at night. The other two stayed in their room most of the time, Mufti Mahmud said, quoting the other

tenants of the flat.

There are two flats on each floor of the six-storey building, except for the ground floor which is used as a parking lot. The flats on the fourth and fifth floors have been rented out to bachelors and the rest to families.

Building's owner Shah Mohammad Sabbir Hossain, a steward of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, lives on the first floor.

His family members could not give any information on the suspects as Rubel looks after the flats on the fourth and fifth floors, said Rab officials.

Around 3:15pm, Rab allowed journalists to enter the room where the militant suspects had holed up.

This correspondent saw bloodstains on the floor. There was no furniture or bed in the room. A mat was kept folded in one corner of the room. Two pistols, a kitchen knife and a packet of keffiyeh (a type of scarf) were lying on the floor. There were bullet marks on the walls, and one of the windows was broken.

Talking to this correspondent over the phone, Parvez Hossain, a tenant in

one of the two flats on the fifth floor, said he woke up to the sound of a loud bang around 3:00am.

"I tried to get out of the flat. But I could not as it was locked from outside. After a while, firing started and continued for at least 30 minutes with several brief pauses," said Parvez, a student of Tejgaon Polytechnic Institute.

He, however, could not say who had locked the door.

Parvez said he and several tenants of the flat then hid under a bed. He phoned his father Kamal Hossain in Gazipur who arrived at the scene around 7:00am.

Not only Kamal, anxious relatives of other tenants at the building rushed to the scene after hearing the news of the raid.

Fifty-five-year-old Farzana, who lives in a tin-shed house nearby, mistook the gunshots for sounds of firecrackers. But later, she spotted Rab personnel near her house and got panicked.

Like her, many residents in the area were gripped by fear during the raid.

PM's speech disappointed people: BNP

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP yesterday claimed that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's speech disappointed the people as it had no indication of reaching an understanding to hold a free and fair election.

"Prime minister's speech will rather take the country towards a further crisis," BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir said in an instant reaction to the PM's speech.

He was talking to reporters at the BNP chairperson's Gulshan office after the PM addressed the nation, marking her government's four years in office.

The party, however, will come up with its formal reaction at a press briefing today at the BNP chief's office, Sayrul Kabir Khan, a member of BNP chairperson's media wing, told The Daily Star.

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Democracy in India at stake

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The justices gave few details of the incidents they were referring to, but released a letter they had written to Misra.

In the letter, they mentioned instances of cases with "far-reaching consequences for the nation and the institution" that were selectively assigned to judges by the chief justice without any rational "basis for such assignment".

All Supreme Court judges should be involved in setting the procedures used to hire and promote judges in various courts in the country, including the high courts, they added.

The chief justice did not immediately respond to telephone calls from Reuters to seek comment.

Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad declined to comment.

Two close aides of Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he was looking into the matter and had summoned top law ministry officials for consultations.

Pressed by reporters, one of the four judges, Ranjan Gogoi, acknowl-

edged that the concerns about assignments were related to the case of a lower court judge, B. Loya, who died in December 2014 while hearing a high-profile trial.

The trial involved Amit Shah, the president of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, and several police officials from Modi's western home state of Gujarat.

The BJP declined to comment.

Separately, last November, the chief justice overturned an order by Chelameswar that referred a case to a bench of the five senior-most judges. At the time, Misra said he was the "master of the roster".

SPEAKING UP
Some Supreme Court lawyers praised the justices' action.

"Looking at its own flaws is the first step to correcting an institution, to deepening true constitutional democracy," said Karuna Nundy, a Supreme Court lawyer.

But there was also criticism over the public nature of the rift. The public spat was distressing, a former attorney-general of India, Soli Sorabjee, told the India Today news channel.

"The public shouldn't see that the judiciary is a divided house," he said.

The Supreme Court has 25 judges appointed by India's president, including the chief justice, and each retires at the age of 65, the court says on its website.

The four justices at yesterday's news conference - besides Chelameswar, they included Ranjan Gogoi, Madan Lokur and Kurian Joseph - are the most senior after Misra.

Three of them are scheduled to retire this year, while Gogoi is in line to be the next chief justice, based on seniority.

Efforts to alert the chief justice that certain things were not in order and that remedial measures were needed had failed, prompting the news conference, Chelameswar said.

Asked if the chief justice should be impeached, Chelameswar said, "That's for the nation to decide."

"I think this is the first of many things to come," said Alok Kumar Prasanna, a lawyer and legal researcher. "It seems clear to me that there's a war going on."

Outrage over racist

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restrict the green card visa lottery in exchange for shielding hundreds of thousands of young immigrants from deportation.

"Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?" Trump said, according to people briefed on the meeting who spoke with The Washington Post.

The New York Times later reported the same comment, citing unnamed people with direct knowledge of the meeting.

The president was referring to African countries and Haiti, both newspapers said, with the Post including El Salvador on its list.

ENCOURAGING RACISM
Trump then suggested the United States should instead welcome immigrants from places like Norway, whose prime minister met Trump on Wednesday and whose population is overwhelmingly white.

"The positive comment on Norway makes the underlying sentiment very clear," Colville said, warning that Trump's comments should not merely be brushed aside as "vulgar language."

"It's about opening the door wider to humanity's worst side, about validating and encouraging racism and xenophobia that will potentially disrupt and destroy the lives of many people," he warned.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham and Democratic Senator Dick Durbin had come to the White House Thursday to outline their bipartisan compromise, but found themselves in the room with several Republican immigration hardliners.

Graham and Durbin are leading efforts to codify protections for so-called "dreamers", immigrants who came to the United States illegally as children.

In exchange, the deal would end extended family "chain migration".

The president and lawmakers are in the midst of intense negotiations about how to shield nearly 800,000 "dreamers" from deportation.

Last year, Trump scrapped the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that protected the immigrants, and set a deadline of March 5 for Congress to legislate a fix.

Their future, he insisted, "should not be used as a bargaining chip to negotiate the most severe and restrictive immigration and security measures possible. These are human beings, not commodities."

The White House did not deny the account of Trump's use of language, but instead suggested the president was "fighting for permanent solutions" that strengthen the nation, in part through the use of a merit-based immigration system.

"Certain Washington politicians choose to fight for foreign countries, but President Trump will always fight for the American people," White House spokesman Raj Shah said in a statement.

Trump yesterday denied making "derogatory" comments about the people of Haiti.

"Never said anything derogatory about Haitians other than Haiti is, obviously, a very poor and troubled country," tweeted the president, who reportedly made the comment during a meeting with legislators on immigration reform.

"Never said 'take them out.' Made up by Dems. I have a wonderful relationship with Haitians. Probably should record future meetings -- unfortunately, no trust!" he said.

FURIOUS DEMOCRATS, REPUBLICANS
Democrats seized on Trump's slur to suggest he is anti-immigrant or worse.

"We always knew that President Trump doesn't like people from certain countries or people (of) certain colors," congressman Luis Guterrez said.

"We can now say with 100% confidence that the president is a racist who does not share the values enshrined in our Constitution."

Some Republicans were also unhappy. Mia Love, a congresswoman from Utah who is of Haitian descent, called Trump's reported comments "unkind" and "divisive", and demanded an apology.

South Carolina's Tim Scott, the only black Republican senator, said that if Trump really did use those words it would be "disappointing".

The UN refugee agency spokesman William Spindler said that "people forced to flee war or persecution and needing asylum should be given protection by whichever country they are in, irrespective of race, religion, ethnicity or place or country of origin."

Polls-time govt as per constitution

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has already "gained people's confidence" through conducting some local government elections, including the ones to two city corporations, in a fair manner.

"I hope that all the parties registered with the Election Commission participate in the next general election and help uphold the country's democratic process," she said.

The PM, however, expressed her apprehension that some vested quarters might try to create anarchy in the country centring on the next election.

But the people will not tolerate the loss of lives and property in the name of a movement boycotting the election, she warned.

Describing people as the country's real owners, the third-time PM asked them to determine their goals. "You have to decide what you want to see -- advancement of the country or backward march of Bangladesh. Think for a moment about the situation in the

country 10 years back."

Throwing a question to the nation, she said, "Don't you want to educate your children with quality education and make them self-dependent? Don't you want electricity in all houses, development of roads in all villages, food in all houses and a peaceful life?"

"We don't want to be identified as poor after 47 years of independence. We want to live as a dignified nation keeping our heads high in the world. If these are your desires, we're always beside you."

She said the government was determined to make the country a middle-income one by 2021 and a developed and prosperous one by 2041. "We aren't sitting idle just setting our aims but we're implementing necessary programmes."

The PM mentioned that the government did not want to stick to the past, but would not surely forget the past. "We'll step forward evaluating successes and failures of the past and

correcting the wrong and errors."

Taking about the last BNP-Jamaat government, she said they gave a rise to terrorism, militancy and JMB leader Bangla Bhai and carried out serial bombings at 500 places of 63 districts simultaneously.

The BNP-Jamaat alliance also killed and burnt people, torched houses and set fire to the Holy Koran in the name of a movement to foil the 2014 election, she added. "Some 500 innocent people were killed, and 3,500 vehicles, 29 trains and nine launches were burnt."

The premier said her party's 2014 election victory helped Bangladesh to be on the development track for nine consecutive years while its economy saw a tremendous growth despite the global economic recession, according to BSS.

Talking about the success under her watch, Hasina said Bangladesh was already a low-middle income country, while its per capita income reached

\$1,610 and the volume of its GDP to Tk 1,975,817 crore.

Besides, the country's growth is 7.28 percent this year and the poverty rate has come down to 22 percent from 41 percent in 2005, she said.

The government contained terrorism and militancy, she said, adding that mass awareness was also being created against such social menaces.

The PM also elaborated her government's successes in education, health, communication, power and ICT sectors, saying the government was providing free textbooks to students on the first day of the year, achieved the capacity to generate 16,350 MW electricity and took electricity to the doorstep of 83 percent of the population.

About the step of her government in establishing 100 special economic zones across the country, Hasina expressed her firm optimism that no one would remain poor in Bangladesh in near future.