

Canadian FM Freeland due on Thursday

Will address OIC meet, visit Rohingya camps

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland will travel to Bangladesh on May 3-6 to address the 45th Session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers.

She will also visit Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar along with other OIC foreign ministers on May 4.

The OIC session, to be held on May 5-6, will discuss Rohingya issue, economic collaboration and humanitarian crises and conflicts, among other things.

"Canada deeply values its relationships with the diversity of countries and people represented in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation," Freeland said in a statement, according to report of Radio Canada International.

"We are eager to discuss how we can take action with OIC partners to support the Rohingya, who faced unspeakable persecution and who have been the victims of crimes against humanity."

Along with international partners, Canada will work to establish a clear pathway towards accountability for the atrocities and human rights violations committed in Rakhine State and coordinate efforts to build lasting peace in Myanmar, Freeland added.

During the visit, Freeland will be accompanied by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Special Envoy to Myanmar Bob Rae, and Canada's Special Envoy to the OIC Masud Husain.

They will visit Cox's Bazar, which hosts several refugee camps, including the Kutupalong camp, home to over 700,000 Rohingya refugees.

Earlier in April, Rae unveiled his final report on the crisis, calling on Canada to take a leadership role in responding to the needs of the Rohingyas fleeing a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing led by Myanmar's security forces in the predominantly Buddhist Myanmar.

"Canada's response should focus on providing humanitarian assistance, education, supporting infrastructure, and mitigating the impact of the violent deportation on Rohingyas women and girls by providing strong support to UN and other international organisations working in camps and elsewhere," Rae said in his report unveiled on April 3.

Schedule

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But no changes have been made in constituencies of Dhaka," he said.

The boundaries of constituencies that changed are: Nilphamari-3 and-4, Rangpur-1 and-3, Kurigram-3 and-4, Sirajganj-1 and-2, Khulna-3 and-4, Jamalpur-4 and-5, Narayanganj-4 and-5, Sylhet-2 and-3, Moulvibazar-2 and-4, Brahmanbaria-5 and-6, Comilla-6, 9 and-10 and Noakhali-4 and-5.

On March 14, the EC published the draft of new demarcations of 300 parliamentary seats with changes to 38 constituencies. Later, the commission received appeals relating to the draft.

Some 407 appeals were made.

Later, hearings on the appeals were held.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina meets the visiting UN Security Council delegation members at the Gono Bhaban yesterday as UNSC President Gustavo Meza-Cuadra, holding the mic, looks on.

PHOTO: BSS

It can't stay unresolved

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world that we are determined to find an end and a solution to the crisis," said the delegation.

"After going back to New York, we will try to explain the ways and means to speed up the implementation of the agreements signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar."

Mansour Ayyad Al-Otaibi, Kuwait's permanent representative to the UN, on behalf of the delegation said, "This is a humanitarian crisis and human rights issue. What we saw is not acceptable. We want to see a solution for that."

"The situation cannot remain without a solution and the message that we are conveying to Myanmar, to refugees themselves, to the rest of the world, (is) that we are determined to find a solution to this crisis."

Briefing the press at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport before leaving for Myanmar, he also said, "All parties should show commitment to solve it as soon as possible. We cannot remain silent about it."

Al-Otaibi, whose country helped organise the tour with fellow council members Britain and Peru, further said the Security Council would "try to explore ways and means to speed up implementation of the [repatriation accord] signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar for safe, free, voluntary and dignified return of the refugees."

Earlier in the morning, the delegation led by Peru's Permanent Representative Gustavo Meza-Cuadra Velásquez called on Sheikh Hasina at her official residence, the Gono Bhaban, where the Bangladesh premier said the repatriation has to be done under the UN supervision.

"The repatriation of the Rohingya people will have to be ensured under the UN supervision," she said and once again urged the international community to continue mounting pressure on Myanmar to take back its one million nationals.

"Myanmar should act in accordance with the agreement they have signed with Bangladesh [regarding the repatriation of the Rohingyas]," she added.

Under the November deal, refugees have to fill in forms with names of family members, evidence of their residency in Myanmar, birth dates, and a statement of voluntary return.

It stated that the repatriation would start within two months since the signing of the agreement, but five months have elapsed and the Myanmar authorities so far verified only 711 persons out of the first list of 8,032 refugees handed over to them by Dhaka.

International rights groups and various regional and global organisations have raised concerns over the repatriation process. They questioned where the persecuted minority will be resettled since hundreds of their villages have been razed and how their safety will be ensured in a country with raging anti-Muslim sentiment.

The Kuwaiti permanent representative, however, said they are not expecting any "easy" and "quick" solution and "all parties should show commitment to solve the problem as soon as possible". It needs time and he did not want to raise expectations too high.

Addressing the pre-departure briefing at the airport, Al-Otaibi reiterated that they cannot remain silent about the crisis and said the issue would remain at the top of the UNSC agenda.

He was flanked by UK's Permanent Representative Karen Pierce and Peru's Gustavo Meza-Cuadra Velásquez. The UNSC team, which arrived in Bangladesh on Saturday, visited Rohingya camps the next day to have a first-hand account of the situation.

In reply to a question, the Kuwaiti envoy said he does not see any resistance from China and Russia. "They are the members of the Security Council and they are with us. You heard them yesterday and today they met the prime minister and they also want a solution to the crisis."

At this point, delegation leader Gustavo said the UNSC is united on the Rohingya issue and the visit is supported by all members of the body.

Replying to a question about the slow progress towards a solution to the crisis, he said the visit was part of their efforts to speed it up.

"We have been concerned that things are going slow. Also the secretary general has appointed a special envoy. So things are happening now and we will continue our discussion," Gustavo said, adding that this will remain a top priority once they return to New York.

Responding to a query, Kuwait ambassador said no one is protecting anyone but they want to see the international obligation is met. Hopefully, he added, the agreement signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar will be implemented.

He highly appreciated Bangladesh's generosity, saying the people of this country opened their doors and hearts for around a million Rohingyas.

Asked whether they would back any move by the International Criminal Court to hold Myanmar accountable for the atrocities against Rohingyas, Al-Otaibi said both Myanmar and Bangladesh are parties to many interna-

tional conventions and there are international laws for crimes against humanity which everybody will abide by.

"We heard that the ICC has adopted a move and they have started a fact-finding mission but the Security Council is different as it deals with peace and security."

At this point, Karen Pierce said it needs to have a proper judicial and quasi-judicial investigation with proper evidence and then a proper follow-up to be able to make the determination in law.

"The fact-finding missions do not do that, they collect evidence, they make an assessment. But this is not a legal determination whether or not we can get an accountability mechanism. So, it is very difficult in the Security Council for reasons you know well."

However, she said the Myanmar authorities have started their own investigation. "We may feel that is too little, too late, but we want to talk to the Myanmar authorities about it, how they see accountability in this case and try to explore what might be done beyond that."

The departure of the UNSC delegation was delayed for nearly about two hours due to inclement weather and it left Dhaka for Naypyidaw around 12:50pm. The delegation will submit its report once they go back to New York after wrapping up the visit on May 2.

'KEEP UP THE PRESSURE ON MYANMAR'

"We expect China, Russia, India and Japan to play a major role in resolving the crisis," Hasina said at the meeting, reports UNB.

PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim later briefed reporters.

He said the prime minister appreciated the international community as it extended support to Bangladesh. She also put emphasis on implementation of the Annan Commission's recommendations on the Rohingya issue.

"The international community should keep up the pressure on the Myanmar government in this regard," she said, adding Bangladesh does not want any conflict and it is trying to have a peaceful resolution to the problem.

Hasina said her government has already carried out the biometric registration of the Rohingyas who entered Bangladesh amid atrocities by Myanmar law enforcement agencies. "Due to the influx of the Rohingyas, the local Bangladeshis are enduring serious sufferings in the area."

The environment as well as forests of the particular area is getting affected seriously due to this huge influx. In the

upcoming monsoon, the prime minister said, the sufferings of the Rohingyas will intensify further. That is why Bangladesh has prepared Bhashan Char Island to relocate 100,000 Rohingyas, she mentioned.

During the meeting, US representative Kelly Currie highly appreciated the prime minister's role, saying she has raised a level for all creating a new international standard by working from a humanitarian point of view.

Chinese representative Wu Haitao said Beijing will continue playing a constructive role on the Rohingya issue, while Russian representative Dmitry Polyanskiy assured of extending Moscow's support to Dhaka for a sustainable solution to the crisis.

'FRUSTRATING'

Legal and international relations experts, however, said it would be frustrating if the UNSC banks on the bilateral deal between Bangladesh and Myanmar instead of taking concrete actions to address the root causes of the Rohingya crisis.

Prof CR Abrar of Dhaka University said the latest crackdown has been the most violent and is tantamount to ethnic cleansing and genocide, and the global community must act strongly for a permanent solution.

"The most important aspect of a sustainable return is granting citizenship to the Rohingyas, ensuring their basic rights and creating safe conditions in Rakhine State," said Prof Abrar, also executive director at the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit at Dhaka University.

The other issue is holding accountable the perpetrators of the genocide against the Rohingyas. It is the UNSC that can play the major role in holding Myanmar security forces accountable, he said.

"If it fails to do that, it would be totally frustrating for the humanity and global peace and security."

The atrocities committed by the Myanmar security forces are not a bilateral issue, rather an international one. So, it has to be referred to the International Criminal Court, Prof Abrar said.

Prof Mizanur Rahman of DU law department said quick repatriation of the Rohingya is very important, but holding the Myanmar army accountable is of utmost importance at the same time.

"It is unacceptable that the perpetrators, after genocidal acts, would remain unpunished because of political and economic interests of some countries. This will remain as an example of injustice," he said.

UK gets

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"I should have been aware of this, and I take full responsibility for the fact that I was not," she said in her resignation letter to May, conceding that she "inadvertently misled the Home Affairs Select Committee", the panel of MPs scrutinising the work of her ministry.

The dramatic exit of close ally Rudd came as a setback for May, whose centre-right Conservative Party faces potentially bruising local authority elections across metropolitan England on Thursday.

Rudd was also seen as a moderate on the EU and a balancing force in a cabinet containing several big-name pro-Brexit figures.

URGENT TASK ON IMMIGRATION
Promoted from communities secretary, Javid's first task will be to take some of the political heat out of the Windrush scandal.

"Making sure that we have an immigration policy that is fair, treats people with respect and with decency -- that will be one of my most urgent tasks," he told reporters.

Javid is the son of a Pakistani bus driver who arrived in Britain in 1961 with one pound in his pocket.

Javid said Sunday that the Windrush scandal felt "very personal" but urged people to concentrate on the government's efforts to rectify the situation.

A rapid riser in the government, Javid was a senior investment banker at Deutsche Bank before becoming a member of parliament in 2010.

He became a Treasury minister in 2013 and joined the Cabinet in 2014 as culture secretary before switching to business secretary in 2015 and communities secretary the following year.

He backed the losing Remain campaign in Britain's 2016 referendum on its European Union membership, but his pro-EU position was lukewarm.

Rudd was the fifth person to quit the cabinet since the June 2017 snap general election, called by May but which cost the Conservatives their majority in parliament.

James Brokenshire, who stepped down as Northern Ireland secretary in January to undergo lung operation, returned to cabinet to replace Javid in the housing, communities and local government brief.

International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt adds to her duties Rudd's other brief as minister for women and equalities.

CLAMPDOWN

Besides May, Rudd was the only other woman in the four top jobs in government -- Downing Street, the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the Home Office.

Rudd had run the Home Office interior ministry since July 2016.

Immigration control remains a hot topic in Britain and was a factor in the June 2016 vote to leave the EU.

A government clampdown on illegal immigration has begun to identify those without papers, scooping up many elderly people from the Windrush generation -- named after the ship that brought the first group of migrants from the West Indies in 1948.

Invited to Britain to help it rebuild after World War II, they were given a legal right to remain by a 1971 law.

However, many never formalised their status, often because they were children who came over on their parents' passports and then never applied for their own.

Outrage over the plight of Windrush migrants -- some of whom lost jobs and fell into debt as they struggled to prove their status -- led to a personal apology from May to Caribbean leaders earlier this month.

The main opposition Labour Party accused Rudd of being a "human shield" for May.

Labour's finance spokesman John McDonnell said: "You can smell the undoubted odour of a government decomposing."

Caught in a web of toil and torture

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Gathering courage, she snuck out of the place and dragged herself half a kilometre away. There, she found two Filipino women with whom she shared her ordeal. They called the police who admitted Rehana to a hospital. She had to stay there for over a month and was deported on March 21 this year.

"I still have to drag myself. I also can't do anything with my right hand," said Rehana whose right leg was in plaster. She was talking to The Daily Star at the capital's Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital recently.

"I don't know who will feed my family. My husband is too ill to work," she said.

The kind of abuse Rehana had to face isn't new. Rather, the trend is on the rise with more women from Bangladesh migrating to the Gulf countries where they are vulnerable to exploitation as they work indoors and are not covered by Saudi labour law, migrant rights workers said.

Amid such a situation, the country is observing May Day today.

According to the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, 1 to 1.2 lakh women went to the Arab countries, mostly in

Saudi Arabia, in search for work between 2015 and last year, a sharp rise from 30,000 in 2011.

Over 56,000 women went to Saudi Arabia in 2016 and 83,000 in 2017. Other Gulf countries hiring female workers from Bangladesh include Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Also, the number of recruiting agencies authorised to arrange jobs for female Bangladeshis increased to over 500 in 2015 following the reopening of the Saudi labour market. However, there are no government data on those being abused and returning home.

According to an official of the expatriates' welfare ministry, 2,906 female workers -- victims of different types of abuses -- took shelter at a safe home run by the Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh last year.

Migrant rights activists say often female migrants end up at the safe home having escaped from the employers' place in the face of torture.

However, on many occasions, those sheltered in the house were abandoned by their employers on completion of the job contracts, they said.

SEXUAL ABUSES, MENTAL TRAUMA
On their return from Saudi Arabia, a

number of female workers said they had faced sexual abuses at the houses of their employers.

Some of the women were even used as sex workers.

"My wife was promised that she would get a decent domestic job. But as she arrived in Saudi Arabia, brokers forced her into becoming a sex worker," said Faruque (not his real name), husband of the 25-year-old victim who went to the KSA September last year and returned early this year.

Faruque said every time his wife refused to abide by the brokers, she was beaten. The woman finally managed to come back home after Faruque paid the brokers a hefty sum.

Yeasmin (not her real name as well) underwent treatment at the one stop crisis centre of Dhaka Medical College Hospital, but is still suffering from the trauma. "She is not in a proper state of mind to work," Faruque said.

Shariful Hasan, head of Brac's migration programme, said since the beginning of this year, they were monitoring the condition of the female workers returning from Saudi Arabia.

An estimated 1000 female migrants returned home either from

the safe home in Riyadh or immigration camp, and almost all of them were subjected to abuses -- sexual, physical and non-payment of wages, he said.

Many of the women, below 35, complained of sexual abuses. Some said they were raped by male members at their employers' family, while some complained that they were forced into sex trade, and were tortured if they refused, he said.

"We have found a number of cases that the workers were not paid wages, and as they complained, they were beaten up," Shariful said.

Shakirul Islam Shakil, executive director of Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), said he knows a number of women who returned being pregnant.

"I know at least one returnee, who gave birth to a child following rape by an Arab man. She now can't be united to her family because of social repercussion," he told The Daily Star.

He said they get to learn of a very tiny fraction of the women being exploited in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia, and called for strong measures to stop such tortures on the women.

Shariful Hasan said sometimes

authorities tend to say the portion of those being abused is small. "But, justice cannot be denied even if one individual's rights are violated."

Activists say Bangladeshis in Saudi Arabia are losing their dignity because so many women are being sexually and physically exploited, but none of the exploiters is being held accountable.

Asked, Shameem Ahmed Chowdhury, joint secretary general of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), claimed there are some cases of physical and sexual abuses but not as widespread as alleged.

"What is important in this case is to hold the abusive employers accountable. Our embassy has to go for legal actions on behalf of the abused migrants. When there will be examples Saudi employers being punished, it will have an overall impact," he said.

However, that sort of legal actions are not taken, Shameem added.

Also, he said, the training of the female migrants -- on domestic work, culture, language and food habit -- provided by the government has to be rigorous to prepare them as more competitive and confident.

Contacted, Gazi Mohammad Julhas, director general of the Wage Earners' Welfare Board, said it is true that some of the female migrants face physical and sexual abuses as well as non-payment of wages.

"We have our welfare staff at the safe house in Riyadh to take care of their food, health and shelter issues. Often, migrants are sued by their employers on charges of running away. Our staffs support them in fighting the cases," said Julhas of WEWB, which manages a fund established by the migrants' fees.

Besides, if there are accidental deaths, the welfare staffs help the migrant families get the compensation, he added.

However, Julhas said the Bangladeshi migrants usually don't lodge complaints against the Saudi employers for any abuses. "If they lodge complaints, we will support them."

Shariful Hasan said a female migrant usually does not have the confidence to file a case against a Saudi.

"In that case, the Bangladesh government has to go for legal fights in the cases having solid evidence," he said.