

US slams Myanmar for ethnic cleansing

REUTERS, Atlanta

The United States will continue to hold accountable those responsible for what he described as the "abhorrent ethnic cleansing" of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Saturday.

Pompeo's statement came on the one year anniversary of the conflict in western Myanmar's Rakhine state that drove more than 700,000 Rohingya from their homes into neighbouring Bangladesh.

"A year ago, following deadly militant attacks, security forces responded by launching abhorrent ethnic cleansing of ethnic #Rohingya in Burma," Pompeo said on Twitter, using an alternative name for Myanmar.

"The US will continue to hold those responsible accountable. The military must respect human rights for #Burma's democracy to succeed."

The military ruled Myanmar for nearly 50 years after seizing power in a 1962 coup and retains considerable powers under a 2008 constitution.

Myanmar government spokesman Zaw Htay was unavailable for comment yesterday.

The government, led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, has denied refugees' allegations of atrocities, saying security forces lawfully suppressed Muslim militants in Rakhine.

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh held demonstrations and prayers on Saturday to mark the anniversary of the outbreak of the conflict.

Thousands of refugees marched, prayed and chanted slogans in events across the sprawling camps in southern Bangladesh. Many wore black ribbons to commemorate what they said was the start of the "Rohingya genocide".

Across the border in Myanmar, the government said security patrols had been increased in the conflict area ahead of the anniversary for fear of further violence. Members of the mostly Buddhist Rakhine ethnic group and Hindus from Rakhine state said they would hold events to remember those killed by Rohingya militants in attacks that triggered the crisis.

Earlier this month, the United States imposed sanctions on four Myanmar military and police commanders and two army units, accusing them of "ethnic cleansing" against Rohingya Muslims and widespread human rights abuses across the Southeast Asian nation.

International pressure on Myanmar has been growing as UN-mandated investigators are set to publish a report on the crisis today and the United Nations Security Council will hold a briefing on Myanmar tomorrow.

'INSTIGATING VIOLENCE' Arrested business woman gets bail

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday granted bail to entrepreneur Barnali Chowdhury Lopa in three cases filed on charges of vandalising and attacking an Awami League office and instigating violence during the recent road safety movement.

Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Md Saifuzzaman Hero passed the order after Lopa's lawyer submitted three petitions seeking bail in the cases filed with Dhanmondi police on August 5.

Apart from her, ten others were also arrested on similar charges.

The ten were granted bail on August 19-20 by different Dhaka courts.

Another Dhaka court is set to hear today the bail petition for quota reform leader Lutfun Nahar Luma in a case filed on charges of spreading rumours on social media and instigating violence during the road safety movement.

Metropolitan Magistrate Subrata Ghosh Shuvo yesterday set the date after hearing the bail petition submitted by her lawyer.

The court will also hear today the bail petition of another quota reformist -- Towhidul Islam Tushar -- arrested on the same charges.

Towhid was arrested on August 5 and Luma, a student of Eden College, was picked up from her grandfather's house in Sirajganj in a pre-dawn raid on August 15.

They were shown arrested in a case filed with Ramna police on August 5 under the controversial section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act.

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Illegally modified vehicles abound

FROM PAGE 1

At Pabna bus terminal, this correspondent met a human haulier driver and owner named Fazlu Khan. He bought a beat up microbus for Tk 1 lakh a couple of years ago and spent another Tk 1.5 lakh on turning the vehicle into a 16-seater human haulier, doubling its original seating capacity.

A motor vehicle workshop in Pabna's Atghoria upazila did the job violating motor vehicle rules.

Fazlu was about to leave for Nagarbari with 22 passengers on the rickety vehicle -- 16 inside and six others on the roof.

"Papers of this vehicle were already outdated when I bought it. I never got them updated. Police hardly ever ask for the documents," the 36-year-old said.

"Why would they? I have to let them use my vehicle for patrolling every 15 days. They don't pay me anything."

The human haulier involved in Saturday's crash on Natore-Pabna highway was not much different from the one owned by Fazlu.

Fazlu earns at least Tk 1,280 a day by driving between Pabna and Nagarbari, a distance of 52km. "The business is thriving."

Asked, Rafiqul Islam, superintendent of police in Pabna, admitted using the human hauliers to make up for the shortage of their own vehicles.

"In the time of urgent needs, we don't have the time to look for the documents," he said. "The problem of modified vehicles has been persisting for years."

"Police can't rid the road of these vehicles overnight. All people concerned should take initiatives."

Many drivers of human hauliers in Pabna and Natore said there were at least 500 microbuses-turned-human

hailers in Pabna and at least 200 in Natore. The vehicles ply the highways.

However, after Saturday's crash in Natore, the administration yesterday forced the vehicles off the highway.

Biplob Bijoy Talukhder, superintendent of police in Natore, said police only used vehicles with proper documents.

Besides the locally modified human hauliers, over 70,000 low-speed vehicles ply the highways in Rajshahi, Natore, Pabna, Bogra and Chapainawabganj, according to transport workers associations and government authorities.

The low-speed vehicles include human hauliers, CNG-run three-wheelers, auto-rickshaws, electric auto rickshaws and locally designed three-wheelers known as Bhotbhoti, Nasiman and Kariman.

Among the 94,254 new vehicles registered in Rajshahi by Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) during the first six months of this year, 332 are human hauliers, 556 auto-rickshaws and 443 three-wheelers.

But local transport owners said, around 30,000 battery-run three-wheelers ply the highways and city streets in Rajshahi. Besides, there are about 3,000 unregistered CNG-run three-wheelers in the district.

The owners of these vehicles have associations that are mostly led by ruling party men, they added.

Even if police stop these vehicles and ask for papers, the drivers call the association leaders, who in turn contact more powerful political leaders, and eventually in most cases the driver and the vehicle get away with a small or no penalty.

Mohammad Shahidullah, superintendent of police in Rajshahi, said keeping three-wheelers off the roads was difficult as the number of the vehicles constantly increased.

Manjur Rahman, general secretary of Rajshahi Bus owner association, said the local administration never paid attention to their demands for

Many young people with no other income sources drive these vehicles for a living, he added.

At least 24 battery-run auto-rickshaws were thrown into a pond while plying the highway in Rajshahi's Baneswar yesterday, he said.

Mostafizur Rahman, SP of regional highway police, said his teams would take strict action immediately. "You will not see any unauthorised vehicle on highways from now on."

In Pabna, the human haulier drivers have no association, but in Natore, there is Bonpara Human Haulier Owners' Association. The association leaders said they have around 100 human hauliers plying Natore-Muladuli road.

Jabed Ali, president of the association and former president of Kadamchhilan union Awami League, said police never stop their modified human hauliers.

"But we provide the police with our vehicles for free whenever they call us," he said.

The association secretary Jakir Hossain, also Kadamchhilan union AL member, echoed the view.

Passengers find these low-speed vehicles convenient as they drop them anywhere on the road and charge them lower than buses, said commuters and owners.

Human hauliers operate between Bonpara to Muladuli, Dashuria to Ishwardi, Pabna to Ataikula, Kashinathpur and Bera upazilas to Pabna, Baneswar to Rajshahi Court, Rajshahi to Bagha, Charchat and Godagari to Bogra and different upazilas to Chapainawabganj to Shibganj.

Manjur Rahman, general secretary of Rajshahi Bus owner association, said the local administration never paid attention to their demands for

removing these vehicles from the highways.

About 200 human hauliers, 1,500 CNG-run three-wheelers, and 2,000 auto-rickshaws ply the roads in Natore.

According to local CNG owners association leaders, every CNG owner pays Tk 300 a month and Tk 40 daily to police.

Acting president Abdur Razzak of Natore district CNG Owners' Association is the president of Natore Sadar upazila Juba League. "We had to pay the police. It is normal across the country," he said.

Mokhlesur Rahman, a CNG owner said, "When police intercept us, we call a certain person who we pay regularly, they deal with the police and make sure that we can leave with little problem."

CNG owner Alam Hossain in Natore said he never even applied for a driving licence.

"For a driving licence, I have to contact a broker, it's not easy. Besides, it's not difficult to drive without the licence," he said.

In Chapainawabganj and Rajshahi-Sonamasjid land port highway, locally made three-wheelers Bhotbhoti and Nasiman are common.

Nayan Ali, a Bhotbhoti owner of Shibganj upazila said, he drives between Daldonchak and Chapainawabganj town daily to collect firewood for local traders. "Police intercept sometimes but we manage the situation."

At least 466 human hauliers and over 4,500 CNG-run three-wheelers are registered with the BRTA in Bogra. Officials and locals said the number of these vehicles on the roads would be much higher.

The report was prepared by Bulbul Ahmed, Ahmed Humayun Kabir Topu, Rabul Hassan, Mostafa Shabuj and Anwar Ali.

Hasty EVM plan

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EC sources further said there might be 44,000 polling centres in the general elections slated for December. Each of the stations will be comprised of five to six polling booths.

Taking this into account, at least 2,64,000 EVMs are required for the polls. Besides, 44,000 more EVMs should remain standby with one machine for each polling station, said an election official.

Some officials estimated that with the 1.5 lakh EVMs to be bought, voting will be possible using those at around half of the total stations.

Yesterday, the EC held a meeting at the Nirbachon Bhaban, chaired by Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda, and discussed bringing necessary changes to the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, to pave the way for using EVMs in the next general election.

Currently, there is no provision in the RPO for using voting machines in the national election.

Emerging from the meeting, Election Commissioner Rafiqul Islam told reporters that they have started discussions on RPO amendment aimed at introducing EVMs in the upcoming parliamentary election.

Without going into details about the discussions, he said the EC will sit again on August 30 to finalise the matter.

Replying to a query, he said after finalising the proposal on EVMs, the EC will send it to the law ministry, which will take necessary measures to pass a bill in this regard in parliament.

The final session of this Jatiya Sangsad will begin on September 9.

Election Commissioner Kabita Khanam, also the chief of the commission's law reform committee, on August 19 told reporters that the EC would try to get the electoral law amended in the parliamentary session next month.

According to some sources, the EC wants to have the provision for EVM as the ruling Awami League wants it in the next election.

In the commission's electoral dialogues last year, 35 of the 40 registered parties, including the BNP and its allies, opposed the idea of EVM in the next general election.

The rest five -- the ruling Awami League, its allies Workers Party of Bangladesh, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal faction led by Hasanul Haq Inu and Bangladesher Samyabadi Dal (M-L) and Zaker Party -- supported EVM.

The BNP has all along been opposing the commission's move alleging that this might facilitate the government's election engineering.

At a press conference on August 19, BNP's Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi Ahmed said, "EVM means flawed election. Free and fair election is not possible with EVM. It will create scope for digital rigging."

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Ruhul Amin Hawlader, secretary general of Jatiya Party, the main opposition in parliament, said people don't have faith in EVMs.

"That's why we think the Election Commission should take more time before using EVMs in the national election," he added.

After holding dialogues with the registered political parties on the next general election, CEC Nurul Huda had said the commission will not go for voting machines in the national polls if political parties oppose it.

The EC has used EVMs on a limited scale in different local body elections and faced some technical complications.

Former Election Commissioner Muhammed Sohul Hussain yesterday told this reporter that the EC should use EVMs in the general election after taking opinions of all stakeholders.

"Otherwise, the fairness of the election will be called into question as voting is a very sensitive issue in our country."

Sohul said question might arise whether it would be possible for the EC to complete necessary training of voters and EC staff concerned about the use of EVMs within the time left before the next election.

He also said after the Bangladesh Bank heist and scams at different banks, people and political parties are in doubt whether voting through EVMs will be fully transparent.

"But it is the EC's job to clear up this confusion," he said, adding, the EC should hold dialogues with political parties in this regard.

Amartya Sen

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harsh treatment," Sen was quoted as saying by the Outlook India on Saturday.

With this, Sen joins many artists, Nobel laureates, rights activists, academics and politicians who condemned Alam's arrest and demanded his immediate release.

Plainclothes men picked up Shahidul from his Dhanmondi flat soon after he gave an interview to Al-Jazeera.

He was charged with making "provocative comments" under section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act and placed on a seven-day remand. He was initially denied access to a lawyer and was allegedly beaten up by law enforcers.

He was sent to jail on August 12.



Passengers cram into a human haulier, with some even getting on the roof. The vehicle, an eight-seater microbus illegally converted into a human haulier, plies the highways although it is prohibited from doing so. The photo was taken from Pabna Bus Terminal yesterday.

PHOTO: AHMED HUMAYUN TOPU

The ban exists only on paper

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In most cases, these vehicles do not have registrations and fitness certificates while their drivers do not have licences, said Kazi Md Shifun Newaz, an assistant professor at ARI of Buet.

Given the risk, the Road Transport and Bridges Ministry in July 2015 issued an order, banning three-wheelers and other slow and unfit vehicles on highways. The ban came into effect on August 1.

The very next day, however, transport owners and drivers put up barricades on different highways protesting the ban and clashed with law enforcers, leaving at least 20 people injured and 75 vehicles damaged.

Soon, it was business as usual again.

The road transport ministry also repeatedly asked the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) to take vehicles incapable of travelling at 60km per hour off the highways, but to no avail.

In January last year, the High Court intervened, imposing a total ban on plying of improvised motorised three-wheelers on highways.

The court also asked the home secretary, the BRTA, deputy commissioners and district police chiefs to place their reports on compliance of the directives before it every six months.

Manzill Murshid, a Supreme Court lawyer who was a party to the writ petition, said they were supposed to get copies of the compliance report but did not get any.

Several government probe committees, formed after some fatal road accidents, also recommended full implementation of the ban to reduce road accidents.