

President approves Digital Security Act

Cabinet did not discuss the bill as promised by 3 ministers; concern of journalists, rights bodies about some sections of the law ignored

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

President Abdul Hamid yesterday signed the Digital Security Bill into law amid widespread criticism that it curbs freedom of speech and expression and media freedom guaranteed by the constitution.

President's Press Secretary Joynal Abedin confirmed this to The Daily Star yesterday afternoon.

Termed draconian at home and abroad, the bill was passed in parliament on September 19, ignoring concerns of journalists and rights defenders and keeping a harsh provision that allows police officials to search or arrest anyone without a warrant.

The bill was sent to the president on Thursday with a number of local and international bodies requesting him to send it back to the House. TIB, ARTICLE 19, RTI Forum, Amnesty International, Ain o Salish Kendra and Human Rights Forum were among the organisations.

Article 80 of the constitution offered the president two options. He could give assent to the bill or return it to parliament with a message that the proposed law or any particular provisions be reconsidered. He also could suggest considering any amendments specified by him in the message.

But he must choose either of the options

within 15 days after the bill is presented to him. If he fails to do so within the timeframe, he shall be deemed to have signed the bill at the expiration of that period.

According to sources, the president signed the bill around noon yesterday when the weekly cabinet meeting was taking place at the Prime Minister's Office.

Nothing about the law was raised at the meeting though three ministers earlier had assured journalist leaders of placing their concerns before it.

Responding to a query, Cabinet Secretary Mohammad Shafiqul Alam in his briefing at the secretariat said the cabinet meeting didn't discuss the Digital Security Act.

A copy of the signed bill was sent to the Bangladesh Government Press from the Parliament Secretariat for publishing of the gazette notification.

After the cabinet meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a senior minister wishing anonymity told this newspaper that the PM expressed her views at her October 3 press conference and so there was no need for any discussion regarding the law.

At that press conference, Hasina said journalists who don't publish false news

SEE PAGE 10 COL 2
SEE ONLINE FOR THE CONTROVERSIAL PROVISIONS OF THE LAW

WHAT THEY THINK

Journalists will have to go through difficult times as the Digital Security Bill has become a law without addressing our grave concern. I don't know what would be our ultimate fate. Amid concern raised by journalists, the government had several times gave assurance that the proposed law would be amended to make it journalist-friendly. But I don't think that would be possible after the president's assent to the bill.



KHANDAKER MUNIRUZZAMAN
ACTING EDITOR, SANGBAD

We are not surprised, though I was hoping naively that the hon'ble president could exercise his constitutional authority to return the bill to the parliament for reconsideration of its draconian provisions decried by the media and civil society that he has not certainly been unaware of. As much as the law is now a fait accompli, like any other law it is not written in stone. We continue to oppose it by virtue of our constitutional right to freedom of opinion.



IFTEKHARUZZAMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL BANGLADESH

We demanded certain amendments to the act so police don't have the power to arrest journalists without warrant. Since the president has signed it, there is no scope for bringing changes to the act in near future. This means the scope for misuse of the law is there. However, we want to keep faith in the prime minister. At a recent press conference, she asked journalists to keep faith in her. The government has come under criticism for the law both nationally and internationally.



MONJURUL AHSAN BULBUL
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, EKUSHEY TV

This is very frustrating. The act is now a big threat to independent journalism and freedom of speech. Now the fate of journalists depends on law enforcers. There are serious risks of misuse of the law by police. Ministers had held a meeting with the editors of the national dailies and promised to raise their concern to the cabinet. Two cabinet meetings had been held since then, but nothing about the concern was discussed. It is very unfortunate.



MATIUR RAHMAN CHOWDHURY
CHIEF EDITOR, MANAB ZAMIN

I am surprised at how the president signed the act when some senior ministers had assured us of raising in the cabinet the editors' concern over the law. In the past we saw how the section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act was misused against journalists. There are risks that the Digital Security Act too can be used against journalists and free thinkers. We are trying to understand what has actually happened.



SHYAMAL DUTTA
EDITOR, BHORER KAGOJ

When the government passes it ignoring our requests we have no alternative than to keep mum. It's a repressive act formulated to control the freedom of media... It's a draconian law. We're rejecting it though our rejection will have no impact.



FAHMIDUL HAQ
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, MASS
COMMUNICATION AND JOURNALISM,
DHAKA UNIVERSITY



Two weeks needed for BNP chief's full checkup

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The medical board formed to examine BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday said it would take around two weeks to start her "main treatment" as the doctors needed to assess her health first.

"She has uncontrolled medical conditions. It is necessary to bring those under control first," Prof Abdul Jalil Chowdhury, a professor of internal medicine at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) and also head of the board, told The Daily Star.

Talking to reporters at BSMMU, Prof Syed Atiqul Haq of rheumatology department, also another board member, said, "Treatment of her illness needs some preparations, including treatment

SEE PAGE 2 COL 5

Death penalty for yaba offenders

Says proposal for a new narcotics law with harsh penalties for producing, carrying, trading or storing the crazy drug

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

One could be sentenced to death for carrying, trading, storing or processing yaba weighing over five grams, according to a draft law approved in principle by the cabinet.

Death or life imprisonment could be meted out if any institution or individual supplies, patronises or invests or colludes in drug crimes, according to the proposals approved yesterday.

If a person carries, trades, stores, or processes yaba weighing less than five grams, he or she could be sentenced to five years in jail and fined, said the draft law placed at the cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Prime Minister's Office.

About 50 of the methamphetamine pills weigh five grams, according to officials of the Department of Narcotics Control.

Briefing reporters after the meeting,

Yaba and Shisha included as narcotics in the proposal

Anyone found positive in dope test to face up to 15-year jail

The draft law includes all types of narcotics, says the govt

Cabinet Secretary Shafiqul Alam said the Narcotics Control Act was formulated in 1990 and it was being updated after 28 years in line with UN conventions on drug trafficking and narcotics control, of which

SEE PAGE 10 COL 2

CEC moves to heal rift with commissioners

RASHIDUL HASAN

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda has finally moved to end his "go alone" policy that used to leave the four other election commissioners in the dark while running the EC.

The move came on October 2 when the Election Commission Secretariat in an office order said there were deviations from rules and regulations in running the activities of the EC secretariat and the four commissioners noticed that. The EC directed the authorities to run the secretariat's activities in line with the rules and regulations, the order added.

Before the issuance of the order, the CEC on the same day had invited the commissioners to tea at his office room.

Sources at the EC have confirmed The Daily Star the issuance of the order.

Distance had been growing between Huda and other commissioners over the former's "unilateral decisions" on different important activities.

The rift came into the open after the four election commissioners last month

SEE PAGE 2 COL 2

Winners must not take all: Juktofront

Discusses the issue, other proposals with BNP

SHAKHAWAT LITON and MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Juktofront, a platform of three political parties that played a crucial role in forging "greater national unity", wants a sweeping change in the current winner-take-all system in politics.

It wants to offer the opposition parties some crucial posts like the ones of deputy prime minister, deputy speaker and at least half of the heads of parliamentary bodies, empowering them with effective roles in cabinet and parliament, according to proposals drafted by the platform.

The proposals would be finalised in consultation with leaders of the BNP, an important component of the "greater national unity". And those would be turned into electoral pledges of the platform in the upcoming parliamentary election, sources at the platform said.

The platform may be named as "Jatiya Juktofront" as decided in principle by senior leaders of BNP, Juktofront and Gonoforum-led by Dr Kamal Hossain at a meeting on Sunday night.

If voted to power in next election, Juktofront leaders said, they would bring major amendments

KEY PROPOSALS

- Deputy PM post for opposition
- MPs to get more freedom in JS job
- Deputy speaker from opposition
- Maximum 2 terms for PM's office
- PM will not hold any party post

to the constitution to implement those proposals to ensure effective "check and balance" in state power.

"We have to go ahead with these proposals to build a democratic country," Mahmudur Rahman Manna, spokesperson for Juktofront, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Manna, also convenor of Nagorik Oikya, said a functional democracy is not possible if those rational proposals are not honoured.

SEE PAGE 10 COL 5

Freedom forever



Obaid Ali

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

On Sunday afternoon, Khulna jail received the copy of a High Court order that one Obaid Ali be released from death row because the court had found him innocent.

There was one problem though: Ali had passed away that very same morning after a long battle against colon cancer.

Ali's story, however, is not one about tragic timing; rather it is about bureaucratic red-tape.

A resident of Sathkira's Kukhrali village, he had been a death row convict for 13 years and had been locked up in the prison cell of Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH), unable

SEE PAGE 2 COL 5



Parked trucks occupy more than half of both sides of a street in the capital's Tejgaon yesterday, obstructing traffic movement. Truck owners and transport workers enforced a nationwide strike for the second straight day yesterday to press home their seven-point demand, including changes to the Road Transport Act 2018. Inset, some workers stop a van in Tejgaon area.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Businesses suffer for truck strike

Truckers relax work abstention after meeting with home minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Truck-owners and drivers continued their work abstention for the second day yesterday, dealing a blow to businesses and affecting the supply chain of goods to the capital.

No trucks left Dhaka yesterday while many from different districts remained off the streets, transport leaders said.

Faruque Hassan, vice-president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), said they had been suffering because of the strike and the impact would increase unless the strike was withdrawn immediately.

"We are having problems already. We are not getting trucks for transporting our products meant for export and import," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

However, leaders of truck owners and workers last night decided to relax their indefinite work abstention and agreed to carry garments products and perishables.

They took the decision following a meeting with Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan at his Dhanmondi residence as he gave assurances to meet their demands, Mokbul Ahmed, convener of Bangladesh Goods Transport Owners Workers United Council, the organisation that called the strike, told The Daily Star last night.

They will hold another meeting with the home minister today at 2:00pm and will take a decision regarding the withdrawal of their work abstention, he added.

The work abstention was announced on Sunday to press home the organisation's seven-point demand, including making changes to the Road Transport Act-2018.

Parliament on September 19 passed the Road Transport Act amid criticism over lenient punishments for deaths

SEE PAGE 2 COL 2