

PM to visit Padma bridge site today

Will inaugurate rail link work

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will visit the Padma Bridge construction site today to see for herself the progress of the country's largest infrastructure project and to inaugurate the construction work of its rail link.

"Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inspect the construction sites of the much-awaited Padma Bridge at Mawa in Mushiganj, Jangzira in Shariatpur and Shibchar in Madaripur on Sunday to see for herself the progress of the mega project," Prime Minister's Office sources told BSS.

During the visit, the sources said, the premier will open the construction work of the rail link between Dhaka and Jashore under the "Padma Bridge Rail Link Construction Project".

Upon her arrival at Mawa at 11 am, the prime minister will first unveil a plaque of the progress of the work of the 6.15-km bridge on the Mawa side.

She will later inspect the progress of the Dhaka-Mawa and Pachchar-Bhanga parts of the N-8 Highway at the Mawa end and inaugurate the construction work of the rail link.

She will then open the permanent river bank protection work adjacent to the main river training work and visit the overall progress work of the bridge at Mawa side.

The prime minister is scheduled to address a "Sudhi Samabesh" at Mawa Golchattar adjacent to Mawa Toll Plaza at 11.15 am.

In the afternoon, the prime minister will visit the Jangzira end of the bridge and first unveil the plaque of the progress work of the bridge.

She will later inaugurate the construction work of the rail link (Jangzira side).

Hasina, also the Awami League president, will then go to Shibchar and address a rally at Iliyas Ahmed Chowdhury Ferry Ghat at Kathalbari in Shibchar upazila.

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Human chain tomorrow

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the Parishad will take part in the human chain, scheduled for 11:00am.

"Sections 8, 21, 25, 28, 29, 31, 32, 43, and 53 of the Digital Security Act must be amended appropriately to safeguard freedom of the media and freedom of speech," said a written statement of the Parishad, read out by Bhorer Kagoj Editor Shyamal Dutta.

Sixteen editors of leading national dailies were present at the press conference.

Pointing to its earlier postponed human chain, the Parishad yesterday said that after the passage of the bill in parliament on September 19, it announced it would hold a human chain in front of the Jatiya Press Club on September 29.

The event was postponed at the request of Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu, who also promised to bring the law minister and the posts, telecommunications and IT minister to a discussion with the editors on September 30.

The three ministers, in the September 30 meeting, publicly committed to taking the editors' concerns to the cabinet meeting either on October 3 or the next one on October 8, the Parishad said.

The ministers also promised to seek the cabinet's approval for resuming discussion with the editors and that all efforts would be made to work out a version of the law acceptable to all concerned, it added.

"Regrettably, neither such efforts were made, nor were we extended the courtesy of being informed by any of the ministers as to why they failed to keep their promise," read the statement.

"The above account amply proves that the Sampadak Parishad cooperated fully with the government and parliament to make a law that was acceptable to all stakeholders. However, all our efforts for cooperation failed."

The Parishad yesterday demanded that the government bring amendments to the law in the last session of the current parliament, scheduled to begin on October 21.

On section 43, it said a prior order from the High Court must be obtained in blocking or confiscating



PHOTO: STAR

The Sampadak Parishad (Editors' Council) holds a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday. The editors would form a human chain tomorrow demanding amendment to nine sections of the newly enacted Digital Security Act.

any computer system of a media house.

The section states that if a police official believes that an offence under the law has been or is being committed at a certain place, or there is a possibility of committing crimes or destroying evidence, the official can search the place or any person there.

The officer, upon putting in writing the reason for his/her belief, also can seize the computer, computer system, computer network, data and information or other objects that can help prove the crime while conducting a search at the place.

Besides, police can arrest anyone present at the place without any warrant if he or she is suspected of committing or having committed a crime under this law.

The Parishad said, "In cases of offences relating to performance of journalistic duty by media professionals, they must be issued summons to appear before a court [as is the law now], and under no circumstances should media professionals be detained or arrested without warrant and due process of law."

The platform also demanded that in instances of offences made by media professionals, it should be

routed through the Press Council to establish a prima facie case. For this purpose, the Press Council may be strengthened appropriately, it said.

In his inaugural speech, Sampadak Parishad General Secretary and The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam said the platform had never rejected the Digital Security Bill or never demanded that the Act be scrapped.

"We only repeatedly demanded amendment to some sections which we think are against independent journalism," he added.

Pointing to the Indian Supreme Court's verdict regarding the country's Information Technology Act, Mahfuz Anam said the Indian apex court declared section 66A of IT Act unconstitutional and struck it down.

According to media reports, section 66A had been widely misused by police in various states to arrest innocent persons for posting critical comments about social and political issues and political leaders on social networking sites.

The Indian court said such a law hit at the root of liberty and freedom of expression, two cardinal pillars of democracy.

In Bangladesh, there was almost a

similar provision in the ICT Act -- section 57 -- which was widely abused to harass free thinkers and journalists.

In the face of widespread criticism, the government repealed the section but kept its contents in several provisions in the Digital Security Act.

Mahfuz Anam said the Sampadak Parishad thinks there should be a strong and enriched law in Bangladesh over cyber security and the government should take tougher stance regarding cyber security.

Pointing to its September 30 meeting with law minister, information minister, posts, telecommunications and IT minister and the Prime Minister's media adviser, the Parishad yesterday said, "Nothing was done in spite of public commitment by three ministers and media adviser to the PM to raise our concerns to the cabinet and open a dialogue with the stakeholders to work out acceptable changes in the Digital Security Act."

"We consider it to be a breach of the trust that the Sampadak Parishad had reposed on the three ministers."

"On several occasions, we met with the law and the ICT ministers and were assured of due consideration. When the bill was being scrutinised by the parliamentary standing committee on

the posts, telecommunications and IT ministry, the representatives of Editors' Council, BFUJ and ATCO were invited, and we had two meetings.

"In these meetings, we raised our objections point by point and shared our concerns in details. The promise of a third meeting [with the Jatiya Sangsad committee], which might have helped reach agreements on many important points, was not met for reasons still unknown to us."

Later, the Parishad also said, the Jatiya Sangsad committee completed scrutiny of the Bill and placed its report in the House with recommendation for its passage without meeting any of its basic demands.

It was passed without any significant changes that could have addressed the main concerns of the journalists, especially dealing with media freedom and freedom of speech.

In fact, a last-minute change was brought about which further strengthened the hands of police to enter newspaper offices and media establishments, search, block and confiscate digital networks and even to arrest journalists without warrant, added the Parishad.

Reiterating its position over the Act, it said the Digital Security Act is against the fundamental rights guaranteed in the constitution, against the spirit of freedom enshrined in the Liberation War, against the fundamental values of ethical and independent journalism.

The Parishad reiterated that the Act will create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, which will make journalism and, specially investigative journalism, virtually impossible.

The law will create panic among all users of computers and computer networks in addition to the media, it added.

President Abdul Hamid on October 8 signed the Digital Security Bill into law amid widespread criticism.

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.

Time for talks

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posts, telecommunications and IT minister and the Prime Minister's media adviser over the Digital Security Act.

The editors took part in the meeting following the request of the information minister after postponing their scheduled human chain on September 29.

"Nothing was done in spite of public commitment by three ministers and media adviser to the PM to raise our concerns to the cabinet and open a dialogue with the stakeholders to work out acceptable changes in the Digital Security Act," said a written statement of the Parishad.

"We consider it to be a breach of the trust that the Sampadak Parishad had reposed on the three ministers," it added.

Asked about Parishad's comment, the law minister said that as the bill has already been passed in parliament, he has to place the editors' concerns at the cabinet before any discussions on it.

"I did not place the matter before the cabinet yet However, time to keep my promise is not over yet. I can say that I did not breach my promise."

He, however, said no discussion would be allowed over section 21 as it has already been settled.

Section 21 says anyone spreading negative propaganda against the Liberation War or the Father of the Nation, using digital devices or instigates to do so, will risk being sentenced up to 14 years' jail or a fine of up to Tk 1 crore or both.

He or she will face up to life sentence or Tk 3 crore fine or both for committing the offence for the second time, it said.

New alliance launched

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Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) led by ASM Abdur Rab and Nagorik Oikya led by Mahmudur Rahman Manna, a former Awami League leader.

Both the JSD and Nagorik Oikya are components of Juktofront, which was formed last year under the leadership of former president Prof Badruddoza Chowdhury, who is also president of Bikalpadhara Bangladesh (BDB).

The BDB, the other component of Juktofront, however, is not in the newly formed four-party alliance, saying they would not join forces if the BNP did not cut its ties with Jamaat.

GOALS AND DEMANDS

The 11-point goal announced by the alliance includes ensuring checks and balances in the state power, decentralisation of administration, freeing MPs from the stringent restrictions imposed on them under article 70 of the constitution, formation of a constitutional commission to make appointments to all constitutional and other important posts and full independence of the judiciary.

The alliance also announced a seven-point demand, including the one for holding the next parliamentary election under a nonpartisan government, dissolution of parliament before the polls and recasting the Election Commission.

The unity process was coordinated by a liaison committee. As part of the process, Manna, Rab, and BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, among others, held regular meetings and finalised the demands and goals.

Around two weeks ago, the BNP announced almost identical goals and demands from a rally in the capital.

The development comes just two weeks before the 90-day countdown

DEMANDS
Resignation of the government
Dissolution of parliament
Formation of a polls-time government.
Reconstitution of election commission, no EVMs
Level playing field for all political parties
Deployment of army with magistracy power
Ensuring presence of local and international observers
Not filing new cases against any political leader after election schedule announcement.

for the election day begins. Under the constitutional provision introduced in 2011, the polls must be held within 90 days of the expiry of the current parliament. Five-year term of the current parliament expires on October 30.

"The launch of the Jatiya Oikya Front will go down in history as a turning point," BNP Standing Committee Member Moudud Ahmed told the press conference that began around 6:00pm.

Alliance leaders said they would work together to mobilise public support for their demands and goals. They also urged people to get united for their voting and other rights.

Fakhrul Islam Alamgir called on other political parties, which are not in the alliance, to join forces.

"No autocrats will be allowed to come to the power in future," said Abdur Rab, the JSD chief.

BIKALPADHARA KEEPS OFF

At a separate press conference at Bikalpadhara's office in Baridhara around 6:30pm, Prof Badruddoza, a former BNP leader, explained why his party did not join the alliance.

GOALS
Bringing balance in power between president and prime minister
Amend Article 70 of the constitution
Appoint judges in a transparent manner
Independence of judiciary
Curb corruption
Reform quota to prioritise merit in government jobs
Ensure women empowerment and equality
Depoliticise public administration, police administration and local government
Ensure discipline in financial sector
Bar any terrorist group from using Bangladeshi territory
Maintain the policy of "friends to all, malice to none" with foreign countries
Strengthen diplomatic efforts to repatriate Rohingya

"We gave the BNP a condition that it should cut its ties with the Jamaat, but it did not comply. This is why we did not join the national unity process," he said.

"Bikalpadhara will not engage in any conspiracy to bring back the BNP to power until it [BNP] cuts its ties with the anti-liberation force [Jamaat] and agrees to bring balance of power in the Jatiya Sangsad," said B Chowdhury, who was forced to step down as president in June 2003 by the then ruling BNP-Jamaat alliance that elected him to presidency.

INTENSE NEGOTIATIONS

On September 22, B Chowdhury, who was involved with the process to forge a national unity, shared a stage with Dr Kamal Hossain and several senior BNP leaders when they made a joint

announcement to work together for a free and fair election.

But cracks developed when Bikalpadhara Joint Secretary General Mahi B Chowdhury, also B Chowdhury's son, publicly said they would not forge any alliance with any political party having direct or indirect links with the anti-liberation force.

He meant Jamaat-e-Islami's presence in the 20-party alliance, which the BNP leads. He also said that the BNP must share 150 parliament seats out of the 300 with other political parties in the alliance to bring balance of power in the House.

Leaders of the JSD and Nagorik Oikya, however, did not agree to impose such conditions, said sources in the Juktofront.

Then at a meeting at the JSD chief's house on Friday night, Mahi raised his objections again. But he faced strong opposition as Manna, convener of Nagorik Oikya, termed his conditions unrealistic, meeting sources said.

Juktofront, Jatiya Oikya Prokriya and BNP leaders were scheduled to hold a meeting at Dr Kamal's residence at 3:00pm yesterday, but the programme was postponed abruptly.

Even after the postponement of the meeting, B Chowdhury and his son went to Dr Kamal's Bailey road house.

But they returned as the eminent jurist was at his chamber at the time.

"We went there but no one even opened the door. This sort of behaviour with a former president [B Chowdhury] is devoid of any sort of decency," Mahi told The Daily Star.

FATE SEALED

However, a senior leader of the Juktofront said the fate of the Juktofront was sealed after Friday night's meeting and they feared Bikalpadhara leaders may complicate

further the whole unity process with their demands.

Therefore, they decided not to hold the scheduled meeting at Dr Kamal's residence. Instead they opted for an alternative.

According to the plan, Mirza Fakhrul, Abdur Rab, Mahmudur Rahman Manna and some other leaders went to meet Dr Kamal at his chamber in Motijheel where they held a meeting.

Fakhrul went to Dr Kamal's chamber at 3:00pm and came out at 3:30pm. He then entered the chamber of Moinul Hossain, a former adviser to a caretaker government.

Fakhrul came out of Moinul's chamber at 4:00pm and entered Dr Kamal's chamber again.

After the meetings, they decided to hold the press conference in the evening to launch the platform, excluding Bikalpadhara, sources said.

The BNP currently leads a 20-party alliance formed in 2012. Before that it led a four-party alliance. Other members of that alliance were Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh Jatiya Party and Islami Oikya Jote.

The four-party alliance, formed in 1999, won two-thirds majority in the 2001 parliamentary election. The 20-party alliance, however, boycotted the last parliamentary election held in 2014 as their demand for restoration of the nonpartisan caretaker government system was not met.

Components of Juktofront, Dr Kamal's Gonoforum and some other political parties also boycotted the polls.

Currently, the ruling Awami League leads a 14-party alliance while the main opposition in parliament Jatiya Party leads a combine of at least 58 parties.

15-year-old RMG worker

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bank of the Old Brahmaputra river.

Quoting the girl, Md Mushfiqur Rahman, an inspector of Kotwali police, said when the victim reached Shambhuganj Bridge area on a bus from Dhaka, one Rahul introduced himself to her. After a brief introductory conversation, he told the girl that he lived in her neighbouring village and offered to escort her home.

They crossed the river on a boat at Kachari Ferry Ghat point around 9:00pm. Rahul then rented a motorcycle of one Bappi Mia, 22, son of Babul Mia of adjacent Char Ishwardia village.

Instead of heading towards the girl's house, Bappi rode his bike towards a lonely place at Binpara,

around half a kilometre away from the ferry ghat, the police official said.

Three other youths joined Bappi there. They raped the girl and left her around 10:00pm after threatening her and Rahul not to disclose the matter.

She returned to the ghat around 11:00pm and jumped into the river with a view to committing suicide, said the inspector, also investigation officer of a case filed in this regard.

Two bikers who carry passengers from the ferry ghat jumped into the river and rescued the girl, he added.

They took the girl to Kotwali police around 12:30am where law enforcers recorded her statement. From there the victim was taken to Mymensingh Medical College

Hospital where she is undergoing treatment.

The victim's mother filed the case with Kotwali police accusing Bappi and three unnamed youths on Thursday, but none of them was arrested as of yesterday.

Rahul was not involved in the rape, but the police are trying to trace him as an eyewitness, said the IO.

The victim's brother, a CNG-run auto-rickshaw driver, said his two sisters work at a garment factory in Dhaka to support the poor family.

"The incident has put us in serious troubles both mentally and socially," he lamented and demanded immediate arrest and punishment of the culprits.

'Ulfa blast' injures four in Assam

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local TV channels claiming that the blast was carried out by the outfit in protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill and National Register of Citizens (NRC) updating exercise. The outfit alleged that the NRC will be used to settle non-Assamese people in the state.

Assam Director General of Police (DGP) Kuladhar Saikia said "an explosive device caused the blast" at a construction material dump site in Pan Bazar locality in which the four passersby, including a woman, were injured. He said an investigation is going on to identify which kind of explosive used in the blast and who are behind it.

The Indian government says the

NRC aims at identifying "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh in Assam and the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill gives Indian citizenship to "persecuted" Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis and some other religious minorities in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Ulfa fears the NRC updating exercise and Citizenship (Amendment) Bill are aimed at conferring thousands of people cutting across religious divides with the status of genuine and permanent citizenship, which would pose a threat to the majority Ahom ethnic group in Assam.

The complete draft NRC was published on July 30 in which over 40 lakh people were left out from the document.

The DGP said security has already been stepped up due to the festival season.

"As there is Durga Puja ahead, we took extra care and intensified security measures. If necessary, we will further strengthen security and deploy more forces in vulnerable areas," he added.

Earlier, Guwahati Deputy Commissioner of Police Ranjan Bhuyan denied the explosion was caused by a bomb.

"We don't suspect it to be a bomb explosion as there were no splinters found and the injuries were due to stones hitting them. We don't suspect it to be a sabotage or terrorist activity from the nature of the blast," the DCP said immediately after the blast.