

Protect civil liberties

Visiting US official urges Bangladesh govt

UNB, Dhaka

The United States has said it continues to call on the Bangladesh government to protect the civil liberties, especially the freedom of speech and freedom of press.

"We support freedom of expression and freedom of media everywhere, including in Bangladesh," US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells told a press conference at a city hotel yesterday.

Sharing her country's concern over the recently-enacted Digital Security Act, Wells said obviously the digital security surrounding the social media and internet is a very serious issue around the world in terms of how to establish reasonable safeguard.

She hoped that there will be a dialogue between the government and the civil society on how to improve the legislation.

The US also urged the government to fulfill its commitment to hold "free, fair, credible and participatory" elections that reflect the will of the Bangladeshi people.

"With a dynamic and fast-growing economy, Bangladesh's future success will be fueled by strengthening of its democratic institutions and governing structures," she said mentioning that is why she conveyed this during her meetings in Dhaka.

Wells said they encourage the gov-

ernment of Bangladesh and the Election Commission to take all necessary steps and mentioned that it is deeply in Bangladesh's interest to have free and fair elections.

Asked about the impression that the US government is backing Dr Kamal Hossain-led initiative, Wells said they support the democratic process but not a particular party or alliance over another party.

She also laid emphasis on stronger democratic institutions.

The US principal deputy assistant secretary said they will continue their call on Myanmar to create necessary conditions for Rohingyas to return voluntarily to their former places in safety and with dignity.

"Towards that end, we continue to urge the Myanmar government to fully implement the Anan Commission recommendations, including recommendations related to access to citizenship and freedom of movement," said Wells offering their help in doing so.

She said they also continue to call for accountability for those responsible for the violence in the Myanmar security forces. "So, those are some of the key themes and messages of my visit."

Alice Wells, who came to visit Bangladesh on Saturday, said the US is committed to assisting Bangladesh in responding to this crisis and the US has

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The eroded bank of the Padma river in Pabna's Bera upazila. Villagers said the river has already devoured more than a couple of hundred houses over the last two weeks. Locals, inset, take a break while dismantling a house as the river continues to erode at a fast pace.

PHOTO: STAR



Fix fees for diagnostic tests within 2 months

HC orders govt body

BSS, Dhaka

The High Court yesterday ordered a five-member committee to fix fees of medical tests in all public and private hospitals, laboratories and diagnostic centres within next two months.

The HC bench of Justice JBM Hassan and Justice Md Khairul Alam passed the order asking the committee, formed by the health ministry, to execute its order.

The committee was formed as per "The Medical Practice Private Clinics and Laboratories (Regulation) Ordinance, 1982", and a joint secretary of the health ministry was made its convener.

"The court has set January 9 for filing a report on the progress on executing its order," advocate Bashir Ahmed, who moved a writ petition in this regard, told BSS.

One Shah Alam had filed the petition in July on behalf of Human Rights Lawyers and Securing Environment Society of Bangladesh.

Following the writ, the HC on July 24 ordered the authorities concerned to ensure open display of charts of fees for different medical services at all the private clinics, hospitals and diagnostic centres within next 15 days.

Garment workers

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During the clash, eight vehicles were vandalised and a lorry was set on fire.

The workers said the export-oriented Swad Garments factory, where around 3,500 people worked, had been sold and it was closed on September 21.

The workers started demonstration the following day, demanding their arrears. They stopped their agitation after the factory authorities assured them of paying their dues yesterday.

As the workers did not get their dues, they started demonstration.

The workers withdrew their demonstration around 12:30pm when the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA) on behalf of the garment factory assured them of paying their dues on November 15.

Nasrin Akter, BEPZA deputy manager (industrial relations), said the Bangladesh-Kuwait joint venture garment factory had recently been sold to a Bangladeshi company. As no agreement had yet been signed with the company over paying the workers' dues, it was not possible to pay their arrears yesterday.

Citing a notice of Miah Imdadul Haque, managing director of Swad Garments factory, the BEPZA official said the arrears would be paid on November 15.

Jahidur Rahman, superintendent of Narayanganj industrial police-4, said the workers took position on the road around 7:00am, halting vehicular movement. When police tried to remove them, they threw brick chunks at them. Police then fired rubber bullets and lobbed teargas canisters to bring the situation under control.

The injured workers took treatment at a local hospital, while the wounded policemen took first aid. Police detained three workers for interrogation.

AL wary over too many contenders

FROM PAGE 1

However, this could become a serious problem for the AL if its high-ups fail to manage the potential rebel candidates and convince them to work for the party nominated runner. Things could get messy after the AL announces its nominees.

More than a dozen AL dissidents won in the last parliamentary election. One of them even beat an AL presidium member.

The party, however, did not take any disciplinary action against the rebels. "But this time the election would be a challenging one as the BNP and other parties will be running," said the AL leader.

The AL's constitution allows expulsion of leaders if they ran against party nominated candidates. But the threat of expulsion could not stop dissident candidates from contesting local government polls held in recent years.

The AL leaders said, "I think the party's nomination will be finalised in the first week of November. We will also take advantage of the provision of the RPO [Representation of the People Order] to manage dissidents."

The electoral laws allow a registered political party to nominate more than one candidate in a constituency but it has to notify the returning officer about its final pick before the last date for candidature withdrawal. The rest of the nominations then becomes invalid.

At that stage, those, whose nomination had become void, cannot run as independents since independent candidates need signatures of one percent of the constituents.

The AL leader also told The Daily Star that the leader believes AL President Sheikh Hasina would have to sit with the potential rebels to stop them from running.

Intra-party conflict also remains as a thorny issue.

In the last four years, leaders of the AL and its associate organisations got involved in conflicts that often became violent. At least 100 were killed and 8,690 injured in 634 incidents of this nature, according to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a leading rights body.

Their clashes with rival parties, including the BNP, were a lot fewer during the period. At least 14 people had been killed and around 1,000 injured in 84 incidents across the country, according to ASK, which gathered data from newspaper reports and its own investigations.

Hasina at meetings with party's leaders had urged her party's grassroots level leaders several times to resolve their internal conflicts, most of which stem from bids to establish supremacy in their areas.

On June 23, at a special extended

meeting of the AL, she came down hard on a section of nomination seekers. She said some people have declared themselves MP candidates of AL and are seen criticising incumbent lawmakers and the party in their bid to woo voters.

Issuing a warning, she said the grassroots would be held responsible if people did not vote for the party in the general election.

Recently, AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader also issued note of caution. On October 5 in the capital, Quader said rebel candidates would be expelled "directly" from the party.

He said anyone could have aspiration to be an AL lawmaker as it is their democratic right. But everyone has to work unitedly in favour of the party-nominated candidate.

"The person who will get the party nomination should not consider other aspirants as enemies," he said.

They were 'picked up' a day before

FROM PAGE 1

On Saturday and she filed a general dairy with Rampura Police Station later on the day.

The bodies were found in Panchrukhi Paschim Para of Araihaaz upazila. They all were hit in the back of their heads with shotgun shells fired at close range.

Family members of the four victims and Liton said they were innocent and not accused in any case. And they do not have any political involvement.

Ambia Khatun, mother of Sabuj, said Liton, Jahirul and her son are cousins and they went to visit Faruk a week ago. The three were staff of Azad Bakery in Pabna, she added.

Visiting Azad Bakery in Boro Bridge area, our correspondent learnt that it has remained closed for the last couple of years.

Meanwhile, Sub-Inspector Rafiquddoula Rafiq of Araihaaz Police Station filed two cases yesterday -- one for murder and the other under the Arms Act.

The four were killed in an exchange

of fire between two groups of criminals, SI Rafiq said, citing the case statements. Later, police found the four dead and recovered two pistols with a bullet and a silver-colour Noah microbus from the spot, he added.

Family sources say Faruk was the driver of a Glory Express bus of Dhaka-Gausia route. He used to live in a rented house at Gausia, around 40km off the district town.

"On Saturday evening, a group of people identifying themselves as members of Detective Branch police picked up Faruk, Jahirul, Sabuj and Liton. They remained missing since then," Jamal Pramanik told The Daily Star at Narayanganj General Hospital morgue after identifying Faruk's body.

Faruk had two wives -- one used to live in Gausia with him while the other was in Pabna, he said.

Jamal said Faruk's wife, who lived in Gausia, called him on Saturday night and told him that the DB had detained the four.

Faruk's daughter Fahima Khatun, living in Pabna, said they could not

contact his father since Friday. She added that her father was living in Narayanganj for the last 15 years.

Nazrul Islam, father-in-law of Jahirul, said Jahirul went to Faruk's Gausia house about 10 days back from where he was picked up. Through Facebook, they came to know about the recovery of four bodies.

Suborna Begum, wife of Jahurul, said the last time she talked to her husband was on Friday when he asked her to send some money through bKash. She could not reach him over phone after that.

Neighbours of Faruk, Jahirul, Sabuj and Liton in Pabna said they had no criminal record in the locality.

Masud Rana, officer-in-charge of Ataikula Police Station in Pabna, also confirmed that the four were not accused in any case in local police station.

He, however, said, "As they often do not stay in the village as we came to know, maybe they were involved in robbery in different other areas."

Asked about the allegation raised by the family members, Abdullah Al Mamun, an additional superintendent (crime) of Narayanganj district police, said detectives did not conduct any raid in the said area on Saturday. But if anyone files a complaint, they will look into the matter.

Meanwhile, the highway police recovered the body of an unknown youth from near the Asian Highway Bypass Road in Rugganj and buried it after an autopsy on Sunday as nobody claimed it.

Liton's mother Shefali Begum still does not know the fate of her son. But relatives suspect that the unknown youth could be Liton as the body was found almost the same time of recovery of the four others.

Kayum Ali, officer-in-charge of Kanchpur Highway Police Station, said the marks on the body suggested the youth was killed in a road accident. They buried him as nobody came to claim the body.

[Our Narayanganj and Pabna correspondents contributed in the report.]

'BNP-may-win' hope spurs race for nomination

FROM PAGE 1

"Many leaders believe they will easily win the polls if they are nominated by the BNP," he said, referring to the 2001 polls, in which the party won a landslide victory with many newcomers winning seats in parliament.

"This has created enthusiasm among many to seek BNP nomination."

Although the party has not formally announced whether it will join the coming polls, BNP's recent activities suggest that it will definitely join.

The party has conducted three surveys in the last few months and prepared a list of prospective MP candidates, insiders said.

In a bid to take advantage of a provision in the Representation of People Order, the BNP primarily selected three candidates from each constituency.

Each of the three will be asked to file for contesting the polls. Of them, one will be finalised just before the deadline for withdrawing nomination papers, party insiders added.

more than one candidate for each constituency. Before the last date of withdrawing nomination papers, the party will have to write to the returning officer picking one of the three as its nominee. The rest of the nomination papers would automatically be considered invalid.

The BNP leaders think this option would benefit their party.

Even if one of the three gets disqualified during scrutiny, the remaining two will stay in the race. This strategy will also help the BNP contain dissident candidates, they said.

Those who will not get the final confirmation will not be able to contest the polls as independent, because of certain restrictions.

To contest the polls as an independent, one needs to submit signatures of one percent of the constituents.

"Only 100 leaders have been given indications that they will get party nominations. They were asked to begin working in their constituencies," Ruhul Qudus Talukdar Dulu, organising secretary of BNP, told The

Daily Star yesterday.

If the BNP joins the election, it will finalise the candidates soon and keep some seats for the leaders of Jatiya Oikyafront and partners in the BNP-led 20 party alliance, he said.

The situation is not the same in the ruling Awami League camp. AL leaders are publicly campaigning in their areas through placing posters, placards and billboards.

But the BNP leaders are obviously taking a different strategy. In many areas, MP aspirants are not being able to hold public meetings. They are providing financial assistance to different organisations in their areas as part their mass contact programme, said BNP insiders.

"I visited 80 Pujja Mandap in the area and provided them financial assistance. I also distributed 1,000 saris among women in Hindu community," said Khondker Ahad Ahmed, senior vice president of Gaibandha BNP.

He added that was looking forward to be the party's nominee from Gaibandha-2 constituency and carried

out the mass contact programme in all 13 union parishads.

He has also come up with an 11-point goal to "make the city liveable" if he is elected.

Mamun Bin Abdul Mannan, an expatriate businessman, who seeks the BNP ticket from Mymensing-9, told The Daily Star, "I donated money to at least 27 Pujja Mandap and visited all of them."

Two other MP aspirants, including a former lawmaker, are working in the area for BNP ticket, he said.

BNP senior leaders believe that the party would not face internal conflicts centring over the nomination.

BNP Vice-Chairman Mohammad Shajahan told The Daily Star yesterday that having multiple hopefuls in the constituencies would not be a major problem.

"Our major concern is about the election atmosphere. Whether we can join the polls and our leaders and activists, many of whom are accused in cases, can take part actively in electioneering is our main concern."

Bangladeshi killed in 'BSF firing'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Chapainawabganj

A Bangladeshi man was killed yesterday in what appeared to be a BSF firing near the border in Chapainawabganj's Shibganj upazila.

Indian Border Security Force, however, denied involvement in the incident.

Quoting locals, Shahadat Hossain, chairman of the upazila's Monakasha union, said Mohammad Jem, 30, a man from Parchouka village, along with others was in his crop field near Shingnagar border.

All of a sudden, BSF opened fire on them, leaving Jem seriously wounded, he said.

Jem died later around 5:00am, he said.

On information, Border Guard Bangladesh went to Jem's house and found his bullet-hit body there.

When the BGB communicated the BSF about the matter, the Indian side said it did not open any fire.

Lt Col Sajjad Sarwar, commanding officer of BGB Battalion-53, said it was not clear whether the man was killed in BSF firing. "We are investigating".

Shibganj police was informed about the incident, said BGB sources.

Landslide

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Hamzah said the body of the ninth victim -- 33-year-old Bangladeshi man Mohamad Uzzal -- was found buried under five metres of earth near a container yesterday.

"The last container found was badly crushed and we don't rule out the possibility of finding several more bodies in the area around the container," he said.

Fair weather conditions yesterday enabled the search and rescue team to carry out its operations. The team was digging as deep as five metres to find other victims, he added.

The landslide happened at a construction site at Jalan Bukit Kukus in the town of Paya Terubong, Penang. A road was being built there.

Meanwhile, civil society group Persatuan Aliran Kesedaran Negara (Aliran) yesterday called for an immediate stop to all hillslope development projects in Penang following the landslide.

"All plans that involve construction or development on hillslopes must be reviewed for workers' safety ..." Aliran said in a statement.

The NGO said it was appalled at the loss of lives in the tragic incident.

While it is unclear what exactly happened at Bukit Kukus, the recent landslide does raise several issues.

"One is the vulnerability of construction workers who were, in this incident, migrant workers from Myanmar, Indonesia and Bangladesh," the group said.

"It highlighted the issue of their safety, especially as a stop work order in the site had been recently issued when 14 concrete beams came tumbling down."

"We cannot help but ask for site safety regulations to ensure the safety of the workers. What were the safety measures being taken in Bukit Kukus? Could the deaths of these victims have been avoided?" the statement said, reports online news portal Malaysiakini.