

Number of journos jailed for duty nears record high

Says CPJ report

REUTERS, New York

A near-record number of journalists around the world are behind bars for their work, including two Reuters reporters whose imprisonment in Myanmar has drawn international criticism, according to a report released yesterday.

There were 251 journalists jailed for doing their jobs as of Dec 1, the Committee to Protect Journalists said in an annual study. For the third consecutive year, more than half are in Turkey, China and Egypt, where authorities have accused reporters of anti-governmental activities.

"It looks like a trend now," the report's author, Elana Beiser, said in an interview. "It looks like the new normal."

The number of journalists imprisoned on charges of "false news" rose to 28, up from 21 last year and nine in 2016, according to the CPJ, a US-based nonprofit that promotes press freedom.

The report criticized US President Donald Trump for frequently characterising negative media coverage as "fake news," a phrase that is also used by leaders against their critics in countries like the Philippines and Turkey.

The study was published the same week that Time magazine named several journalists as its annual "Person of the Year."

That group included Reuters reporters Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who were imprisoned one year ago on Wednesday, and Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was killed at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul two months ago.

Wa Lone, 32, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 28, were found guilty in September of violating Myanmar's Official Secrets Act and sentenced to seven years in prison. They had been investigating the massacre of 10 Rohingya Muslim men and boys amid an army crackdown that has driven hundreds of thousands of refugees into Bangladesh.

Sramik League leader stabbed in Shibganj

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Chapainawabganj

Criminals stabbed a Sramik League leader in Baliadighi village of Chapainawabganj's Shibganj upazila last night.

Sadekur Rahman, president of the pro-Awami League body in Sonamasjid Land Port, is a resident of Baliadighi village, said Moshir Rahman, officer-in-charge of Shibganj Police Station.

About five masked attackers stabbed Sadekur in front of the office of Sramik Samonny Committee of Baliadighi around 9:00pm, leaving him seriously injured.

Locals took him to Shibganj Upazila Health Complex. As his condition deteriorated, doctors sent him to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital.

No more

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and why their failure to protect the rights of the subscribers should not be declared illegal.

Secretary to the post and telecommunications ministry, chairman and secretary of BTRC and the chief executive officers of the mobile phone operators have been made respondents to the rule.

The HC bench of Justice Tariq ul Hakim and Justice Md Shohrwardi came up with the order and rule.

Members of Law Reporters Forum (LRF) M Badiuzzaman and Mahidi Hasan Dalim, Mobile Phone Subscribers Association President Mohiuddin Ahmed and Supreme Court lawyer Rashedul Hasan collectively submitted the petition recently seeking necessary directives from the HC.

In the petition, they requested the court to direct the authorities concerned to form a committee to decide financial compensation for mobile call drops and to issue a ban on hiking mobile call rate in future, charging for dropped calls and sending multiple SMS's. They also said the operators increased mobile call rates without taking subscribers' opinions which can be deemed illegal and against consumer rights.

Around a total of 222 crore calls have been dropped by operators from September 2017 to September 2018, according to a BTRC report.

The mobile operators were supposed to compensate the subscribers for the charged call drops but they did not do so, the report said.

Advocate Ishrat Hasan appeared for the petitioners while Deputy Attorney General Amatul Karim Swapna represented the government.

Targeted for trafficking



Rohingya refugees gather in the "no man's land" behind Myanmar's border lined with barbed wire fences in Maungdaw district, Rakhine state bounded by Bangladesh.

PHOTO: AFP

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Cox's Bazar, Myanmar, Malaysia or Indonesia, raising fresh fears of a migrant crisis.

Bangladeshi law enforcers rescued around 80 Rohingyas in the last two months, with the latest being on November 30, when they were trying to cross the Bay of Bengal to reach Malaysia, said police officials in Cox's Bazar.

On December 4, a boat carrying 20 Rohingyas landed on the northeastern shore of Indonesia's Sumatra Island from Myanmar.

In early April, two Rohingya men died in a boat that arrived in the Aceh province of Indonesia with 17 passengers from Myanmar.

In the same month, another vessel carrying 79 Rohingyas arrived there, while Malaysia intercepted a boat carrying 56 Rohingyas on its coast and are sheltering them.

Myanmar's naval authorities intercepted two boats -- one on November 16 and the other on November 29 -- with some 200 Rohingyas on board while being trafficked to Malaysia through sea.

"Rohingya youths -- both men and women -- in the camps in Cox's Bazar can't move beyond these camps. They don't see a tangible future. Under such conditions, many Rohingyas are susceptible to trafficking," said Major Mehedi Hasan, company commander of Rab's Cox's Bazar camp.

Their desperation to go to Malaysia is more than those of the traffickers, he told The Daily Star on December 3. "They think they can have a better economic future in Malaysia; they can move freely."

A police official in Cox's Bazar said their inquiry found that traffickers help build relationships between the Rohingya girls in the camps and the Rohingya men who are already in Malaysia.

"Eventually, the girl marries the man in Malaysia over phone. This way, the traffickers make the girls believe in the marriage and get them out of the camps for trafficking to Malaysia," he

said.

Anti-trafficking campaigners say Rohingyas tend to take on the risky voyages mostly following violence. It was evident following communal violence in Rakhine in 2012 when some 200 Rohingyas were killed and 124,000 displaced.

Trafficking through the seas reached its peak in May 2015 when Malaysian authorities discovered 139 graves believed to contain the bodies of Rohingyas. Numerous similar graves were also found along the Thai-Malaysia borders.

Traffickers used to hold the victims hostage in the Thai jungles for ransom and moved overland to Malaysia. Those who failed to pay ransom were tortured. With the discovery of mass graves, law enforcers began an anti-trafficking crackdown, which eventually had collapsed the regional trafficking networks then.

Now, after the military crackdown last year that forced some 750,000 Rohingyas to enter Bangladesh, a fresh wave of human trafficking through the seas seems to be rising.

Regional rights body Fortify Rights said trafficking of Rohingyas from Myanmar is also happening overland. Its research from February to May based on 16 interviews of Rohingyas who fled Myanmar to reach Thailand, found that the human traffickers caged and withheld food and water from the Rohingya men, women, and children.

Rohingyas are also being trafficked to Dhaka, Chittagong and elsewhere in Bangladesh from the refugee camps.

In a report in October this year, UN Migration Agency IOM said young girls sold into forced labour are the largest group of trafficking victims in Bangladesh's Rohingya refugee camps.

"There are limited jobs in the camp and for women there is almost nothing. That's why I went outside of the camp," one young Rohingya woman, who ended up being forced to work long hours for very little pay in the fish processing industry, told the IOM.

Dina Parmer, IOM's head of protection services in Cox's Bazar, said men,

women and children were all at risk of exploitation by traffickers. But the demand for girls and young women to work as domestic maids means they are often targets.

"Once trafficked, their youth, inexperience and isolation leave them particularly vulnerable to abuse," she added.

Out of the 99 cases of trafficked persons identified last year, 35 were girls, 31 women, 25 men and eight boys. Most of them were found in exploitative labour situations and five women and four girls ended up being in the exploitative sex trade, the IOM said.

Bangladeshi security agencies have reported stopping up to 60 women and girls a day from attempting to leave the camps in small groups, it added.

Omar Sadek, outreach coordinator of Young Power in Social Action, which is creating awareness in the refugee camps, said the Rohingyas, who have been living in Cox's Bazar camps for many years, have links to the Bangladeshi community and work as one of the trafficking networks.

They allure the young Rohingya girls with marriage proposals from Bangladeshi men but sell them as maids. Many of them also end up in prostitution.

"We suspect that Rohingyas are spread out over various parts of Bangladesh," he said.

John Quinley, human rights specialist with Fortify Rights, recommended that Bangladesh provide the Rohingya full protection and access to education, healthcare and freedom of movement to prevent trafficking.

"Members of ASEAN as well as Bangladesh should take coordinated action to address root causes in Myanmar and provide support to refugees seeking safety," he added.

Nahid Adnan Tainan, additional police superintendent in Cox's Bazar, said though the 32 camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf were without any fence, they had a strong police presence in each camp.

"Yet, some Rohingya may dodge police checks and escape the camps," he told The Daily Star on December 3.

A ghost survey

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"We have no plan to conduct any such survey right now," said Hamid, advising this paper to contact the BBS as it ran this kind of surveys several times.

Approached, BBS Director General Krishna Gayen also denied having collected any mobile phone user data from the BTRC in recent days.

However, she said a few months ago they did a survey through mobile phones. Collecting data from the BTRC of only 18,000 mobile users, they had reached 12,000 at that time.

The power ministry's Power Cell, which usually conducts survey and study on power-related issues, also did not receive any customer data from the BTRC, confirmed its Director General Mohammad Hossain.

Meanwhile, three competent sources confirmed to The Daily Star that in reality Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Power and Energy Adviser Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury collected the data from the BTRC and handed it over to the BBS.

Contacted last night, he admitted collecting the data for a survey on power consumers' satisfaction.

Asked why he collected such sensitive data immediately before the election, he claimed they had originally sought the data long ago but the BTRC took time to hand over the information.

He said they expected to conduct the survey in January if the Awami League returned to power. He also said as an adviser to the PM, he had the authority to collect such data.

On December 4, the telecoms regulator sent a letter to all the four mobile operators, asking them to provide the data as early as possible. The letter said the power and energy ministry needed the data for what it called an "electricity survey". The Daily Star has a copy of the letter.

The operators entertained the request on December 10.

Personal data of all the mobile users in 184 upazilas were collected in the process. The upazilas are from Dhaka, Khulna, Chattogram, Rangpur, Sylhet, Rajshahi, Mymensingh and Barishal

divisions, according to the list attached with the BTRC letter.

This is for the first time that the telecoms regulator has collected such a huge volume of user data of certain locations, and suspicions deepened as it coincides with the run-up to the national election, industry insiders said.

There are concerns about the risk of data leak as well. In their written communications with the regulator, operators also voiced their concern about data security and other privacy risks, and warned the BTRC that other government authorities can also demand the same information in future.

Against a phone number, there are 36 types of information about a customer. The BTRC, however, sought only two of those -- phone numbers within the geographical locations and customer's sex.

To some extent, that minimised the risk of possible damage to users or the telecoms operators in case this bulk data are somehow obtained by any unscrupulous person or party, observed telecoms industry experts.

"We are spending crores of take every year for safeguarding our system and our user data. Everything is now at stake because of this breach," said a top executive of a mobile operator, asking not to be named.

Referring to sections 30 (f) and 97 of the Telecommunication Act-2001, Supreme Court lawyer Aneek R Haque said collecting customers' information without their consent is a direct violation of the law.

"As a regulator, it is BTRC's duty to ensure users' privacy and they [BTRC] can't avoid their responsibility in any circumstances," said Haque, also a former legal consultant of the BTRC.

The telecoms watchdog can take customers' dataset only in case of an emergency, and there is no national crisis at the moment, the lawyer pointed out.

But the BTRC insists that it has the authority to collect user data and share those with the government if needed.

Take the country

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willpower," she said.

Hasina said this while speaking at an interactive session titled "Let's Talk with Sheikh Hasina", organised by think-tank Centre for Research and Information at her official residence Ganobhaban on November 23.

"I am handing over the responsibility to you," she told a diverse group of youths as she listened to their dreams, hopes and aspirations about future Bangladesh.

The Centre of Research and Information (CRI)-sponsored interaction "Let's Talk with Sheikh Hasina" premiered on television on Thursday simultaneously broadcast on state-run Bangladesh Television (BTV) and private TV stations Maarsanga, RTV, Channel 24, Channel i, ATN News, Gazi TV, DBC News and Somoy TV.

The programme was also made available for online streaming at the same time on the Facebook pages of CRI and Young Bangla, along with a number of newspapers and news portals and agencies.

They include Daily Ittefaq, Kaler Kantho, Samakal, Daily Jugantor, bdnews24.com, sarabangla.net, Bangla Tribune, banglanews24.com, Bangladesh Pratidin, bdmorning.com, United News of Bangladesh (UNB), barta24 and radio station Radio Dhol.

China, Canada

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against Canada's arrest of Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Chinese telecom giant Huawei, at Washington's request on allegations related to breaking Iran sanctions.

Meng was released on Can\$10 million (US\$7.5 million) bail by a court in Vancouver on Tuesday pending a US extradition hearing.

Her case has infuriated Beijing and shaken Canada's relations with China, which is itself embroiled in a trade war with the United States.

Kovrig's employer, ICG, had reported his arrest earlier this week while Canada's government said on Wednesday that it had not heard from Spavor since he was questioned.

Lu said China provided "relevant information" to the Canadian consulate "without delay".

Spavor is based in northeast China, where he runs the Paektu Cultural Exchange programme, an organisation that facilitates sport, cultural, tourism and business trips to North Korea.

Every vote

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"The BNP-Jamaat doesn't believe in Liberation War. They don't want people's welfare. Development will take place only if the Awami League is voted to power," she said.

Earlier in the day, Hasina started her journey around 9:04am by road from Tunjirpara.

On Wednesday, the AL president launched her party's election campaign for the upcoming national election by addressing a public rally at Sheikh Lutful Rahman Government Degree College ground at Kotalipara in Gopalganj.

It's genocide

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The resolution also condemned the arrest of two Reuters journalists who helped uncover one of the Myanmar military's mass graves.

It called for their immediate release.

Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were arrested around a year ago on December 12, 2017 and sentenced in September this year to seven years in prison for breaching a law on state secrets -- charges that have been roundly criticised and described as trumped up.

Myanmar has long oppressed the Rohingyas and other ethnic minorities. Starting last August, the country began what the United Nations called a systematic campaign to eradicate the Rohingyas and drive them from their homes into Bangladesh.

More than 700,000 refugees escaped to make the journey and joined hundreds of thousands who already lived in camps in Cox's Bazar. There are now close to 1 million there.

"It is time we call these atrocities against the Rohingya what they are: genocide," Steven Joseph Chabot, a member of the Republican Party, had said in a statement on September 27 this year when he introduced the bill.

He even cited the US State Department's own report, saying, "If this determination wasn't obvious before, the recent report ... should leave little doubt in anyone's mind. The perpetrators must be held accountable."

Chabot introduced the resolution this week with a bipartisan group of cosponsors, including the top Republican and Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ed Royce of California and Eliot Engel of

Zimbabwe in November in the venue's inaugural Test earlier this year and lost the only T20I played here against Sri Lanka in February. However, Mashrafe was not too bothered by the two losses, saying that there was no point thinking of the past.

As far as changes go, Imrul Kayes is likely to make way for Mohammad Mithun, who will slot in down the order while Soumya Sarkar moves up to the number three spot. A second change may see Mohammad Saifuddin come in for Rubel Hossain.

"It is on the tip of everyone's tongue. West Indies haven't won an ODI series for quite some time," West Indies skipper Rovman Powell said. "This is a grand opportunity to change it. The guys are upbeat and confident of doing

May survives

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quickly as possible on the assurances that are necessary."

EU leaders were clear. They all said they needed to know exactly what May wanted to secure in Brussels but also warned that Britain could not reopen the divorce deal, or withdrawal agreement, signed off by both sides in November.

While others tried to temper their language by expressing a desire to help May, French President Emmanuel Macron ruled out any legal changes to the agreement.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel was less strident, saying: "We can of course talk about whether there are additional assurances but in this the 27 EU members are together and will

make their interests clear, although always in the spirit that we want very, very good relations with Great Britain after Great Britain has left the European Union."

May met the EU leaders to discuss Brexit yesterday, less than 24 hours after she survived a no confidence vote among Conservative lawmakers in London, when critics of her plan tried to bring her down.

She won the secret ballot 200-117 but the size of the vote against her merely deepened divisions just weeks before parliament needs to approve a deal to prevent a disorderly exit from the EU. Victory also came at a price - May promised she would step down by the next election scheduled for 2022.