

UN envoy arrives in Yemen to push Hodeida truce

AFP, Sanaa

The UN envoy for Yemen arrived in the capital Sanaa on Saturday for talks to shore up a ceasefire in the country's lifeline port city of Hodeida, an AFP photographer said.

Martin Griffiths is scheduled to hold talks in Sanaa with Huthi rebel leaders before visiting Saudi capital Riyadh to meet Yemeni government officials.

While in Sanaa he will also meet retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert, who has been appointed by the UN to head a truce monitoring team.

Huthi sources said Griffiths would visit Hodeida city on Sunday.

The Red Sea port is the entry point for the majority of imports to Yemen, where more than 22 million people now depend on humanitarian aid to survive.

The UN envoy made no remarks on arrival, but he met five children with chronic diseases who were waiting in ambulances to call for the lifting of the years-old blockade on Sanaa airport.

Huthi rebels say the airport blockade has prevented thousands of Yemeni patients from travelling abroad for treatment.

AL, admin

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completely become public enemy," he said.

The BNP leader was talking to reporters in Cumilla on his way to Noakhali to visit the Subarnochar woman who was allegedly gang-raped after the election early on December 31.

Fakhrul said an "anarchic and terrifying" situation has been created all over the country due to violent incidents ahead of the polls, on the voting day and afterwards.

Condemning the rape incident and other polls-related violence, he called upon the people to stand against such incidents.

Fakhrul also said his party has already informed the authorities concerned, especially the Election Commission, about the role they should play to bring an end to violence.

"We are calling upon the authorities concerned to stop this violence completely," he added.

Beauty s-care

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lightening products like bleaching, whiteners, brighteners, and fading creams.

"People who want to get fairer within a short time prefer these kinds of creams," said Md Parvez, a salesperson at a cosmetics shop in Hossainia Market.

Both men and women buy the products, he said.

The use of skin-lightening creams and soaps is widespread across the globe, especially in Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

Global sales of these products stood at \$17.9 billion in 2017, and are projected to reach \$31.2 billion by 2024, according to Global Industry Analysts, a reputed publisher of off-the-shelf market research.

According to the ZMWG report, many users living in regions where they frequently get exposed to ultraviolet rays are in greater risks of skin cancer.

Many active ingredients in commercially available formulations specifically target the production of the pigment melanin in the skin cells, effectively destroying the natural ability of the skin to protect itself from UV light, it reads.

Besides causing rashes, discoloration, scarring, and reducing the skin's resistance to bacterial and fungal infections, inorganic mercury present in skin-lightening products may even damage kidneys, according to the World Health Organisation..

Other health effects may include anxiety, depression and peripheral neuropathy.

"Toxic trade in illegal high mercury skin lighteners is a global crisis which is expected only to worsen with skyrocketing global demand," said Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, the international co-ordinator of ZMWG.

"To combat this, it's important for governments to quickly enact and enforce regulations and effectively warn consumers," she added.

Environment and Social Development Organisation Chairperson Syed Marghob Murshed urged the government to take regulatory and legislative actions to protect the future generation from a serious health hazard.

SM Ishaque Ali, director at BSTI, admitted that some whitening creams available in the market contained high levels of mercury.

"We do not give them clearance," he said.

Deputy Director (Certification Marks) of BSTI Reazul Haque said, "We have some limitations as exemption is given to specialised whitening, acne, medicated and therapy creams. This is why we cannot launch drives and seize the products from in market."



Wrapped in a shawl, a woman walks in Saptana area of Lalmonirhat town late in the morning yesterday. The sun was yet to provide relief to one of the coldest regions of the country. Story on page 5.

PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Crack in Oikya?

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4:00pm on December 30.

The BNP, another major component of the Oikyafront, said the next day that its leaders elected in the 11th parliamentary polls will not take oath as they have already rejected the results.

The party took the decision at a meeting of its standing committee alleging various irregularities and violations, including ballot stuffing and ouster of opposition polling agents, from voting centres.

Contacted yesterday, Mirza Fakhrul refused to make any comment on the Gonoforum's latest position.

"I am in Noakhali and I am not aware of any such decision. That's why I don't want to make any comment on this," Fakhrul told this correspondent.

Another Oikyafront leader Mahmudur Rahman Manna, who is also coordinator of Nagorik Oikya, told The Daily Star that the alliance leaders will sit at 11:00am today to decide whether its MPs-elect will take oath.

This is the first time any Gonoforum leader won in the national election

since formation of the party in 1999.

At yesterday's briefing, Dr Kamal said the two leaders of the party can play a positive and meaningful role in parliament after taking oath.

"If others think it won't be possible for them to play a good role in parliament, they may take a decision in line with that thinking."

In reply to a query, Dr Kamal said he thinks it will not create any problem with the BNP if the two MPs-elect take oath.

"I think the Jatiya Oikyafront will remain intact to create pressure on the government," he said.

"We've formed the Oikyafront so that we can realise our demand for a free and fair election. We believe that if Oikyafront functions effectively, we'll be able to mount pressure on the government over the election and force it to discharge its duties obeying laws."

The Gonoforum chief said that in principle, the party is in favour of keeping the unity and will take a positive decision in this regard after discussions.

He added that the Oikyafront has kept its movement on and it may be

intensified further in the days to come.

Replying to a question, he said they may move the court over the election if they get the evidence of serious Electoral fraud.

In the December 30 polls, 280 candidates of Oikyafront and BNP-led 20-party alliance ran with BNP's electoral symbol "sheaf of paddy".

The Oikyafront managed to win only seven seats and two of those were bagged by Gonoforum candidates.

The AL-led grand alliance secured 288 seats. JP, a key component of the alliance, bagged 22. Independent candidates got three.

The election in Gaibandha-3 constituency was rescheduled for January 27 following the death of a candidate, and re-polling will take place in three centres in Brahmanbaria-2 on January 9.

Gonoforum leader Mukabbir Khan had initially quit the race as he was denied nomination from the Oikyafront.

The alliance nominated missing BNP leader Ilias Ali's wife Tahsina Rushdir Luna. But she lost her candidacy following a High Court order.

It then called back Mukabbir to

contest in the election as BNP candidate. He contested the polls with Gonoforum's electoral symbol "rising sun".

Munsur won from Moulvibazar-2 with BNP's symbol "sheaf of paddy".

On October 13, BNP and three other political parties formally launched an alliance called Jatiya Oikyafront, around two months before the national election.

The alliance unveiled an 11-point goal and promised to bring sweeping reforms in governance system if voted to power.

Three other components of the alliance are Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) led by ASM Abdur Rob, Manna's Nagorik Oikya, and Krishak Samik Janata League led by Kader Siddique.

Rob and Kader could not be reached for comments.

At yesterday's briefing, Gonoforum General Secretary Mostafa Mohsin Montu in a written statement described the way the December 30 election was manipulated and rigged.

So, he said, those declared winner by the Election Commission were not actually "elected".

Hasina keeps AL ranks guessing

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their leaders.

The Jatiya Party's decision to be the main opposition in parliament came as a boon for some alliance lawmakers. It has opened up more cabinet seats.

JP Chairman HM Ershad yesterday wrote to Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury asking her to take necessary measures so that he and JP co-chairman GM Quader could act as the leader of the opposition and deputy leader of the opposition in parliament.

Despite it being the weekend, the cabinet division had a hectic day yesterday to complete necessary procedure for the ministers' swearing in to be held at the Bangabhaban around 3:30pm tomorrow.

As part of the preparations for the oath taking ceremony, the division yesterday asked the Paribahan Pool to

ready at least 40 SUVs for taking the new ministers to the Bangabhaban, sources said.

Medical and fitness tests of 40 drivers were also completed, they said.

Hasina did not hold any official meeting with her party's high-ups to discuss her probable cabinet. She did not even say how many ministers would her cabinet have, AL insiders said.

They mentioned names of a few who could be in Hasina's mind. AL presidium members Faruk Khan and Abdur Razzaque, AL president's adviser Salman F Rahman, former Bangladesh Bank governor Mohammed Farashuddin, former IGP Nur Mohammad, AL leader Dipu Moni, Bangladesh ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, AKM Abdul Momen, former BSMMU vice-

chancellor Pran Gopal Dutta were among them.

JP DEVELOPMENT

In the letter to the Speaker, Ershad said, "According to the election results, JP got 22 seats and has emerged as the second largest party and therefore became the main opposition party."

"Under these circumstances, the party has made the decision that, I, Hussain Mohammad Ershad (Rangpur-3), will act as the opposition leader and party's co-chairman Golam Mohammad Quader (Lalmonirhat-3) will act as the deputy leader of the opposition," Ershad in the letter said.

On Friday, going against his party's parliamentary body's decision, Ershad announced that JP would be the main opposition and that he would be the leader of the opposition.

JP's parliamentary party on

Thursday unanimously decided to join the AL-led alliance government.

In a statement sent to the press, Ershad yesterday nominated JP Secretary General Moshir Rahman Ranga as the opposition chief whip.

GM Quader, younger brother of Ershad, yesterday said his party would be a strong opposition.

"Instead of resorting to acts of violence, we want to be a strong opposition in the House and raise our voice for the country and its people," he said.

While addressing a press conference at Ershad's Banani office, Quader said, "There will be no Jatiya Party lawmaker in the new cabinet as it wants to play a positive role in the House for the sake of the country."

Quader said Ershad was quite well and he would take oath immediately after talking to the Speaker.

US govt shutdown can last months or years

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until he secures money for the wall. As a result, around 800,000 public workers have been unpaid, with about a quarter of the federal government closed for two weeks.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer said Democrats had told Trump during the meeting to end the shutdown. "He resisted," Schumer said. "In fact, he said he'd keep the government closed for a very long period of time, months or even years."

Trump confirmed that comment but painted a more positive picture of the meeting, the first since a new era of divided government began when Democrats took control of the House of Representatives on Thursday.

"We had a very, very productive meeting, and we've come a long way," Trump said.

According to a source familiar with the White House discussion, Trump opened the meeting with a speech that lasted at least 15 minutes in which he insisted on the need for billions of dollars to fund a border wall.

The source also said Trump brought up recent impeachment threats during those remarks, arguing that he had notched a strong performance as presi-

dent and should not be a target for impeachment.

The president later told reporters that Nancy Pelosi, the new Democratic speaker of the House of Representatives, said Democrats were not looking to impeach him.

Raising the stakes in his tussle with the newly emboldened Democrats, Trump threatened extraordinary measures to build the wall, which he says is needed to stem the flow of illegal immigrants and drugs into the United States.

A reporter asked Trump whether he had considered declaring a national emergency to build the wall.

"Yes, I have. And I can do it if I want," Trump said. "We can call a national emergency because of the security of our country... I may do it. But we can call a national emergency and build it very quickly. And it's another way of doing it. But if we can do it through a negotiated process, we're giving that a shot."

Emergency powers have been invoked by previous US presidents during times of war.

Senator Jack Reed, the senior Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, criticized the comments, saying in a statement,

"Declaring a trumped up national emergency in order to skirt congressional approval is wrong."

The US Constitution assigns Congress the power to fund the federal government, so Trump likely would face legal challenges if he tried to bypass Congress on financing the wall. Building a wall - and having Mexico pay for it - was one of Trump's main promises when he ran for president in 2016.

Trump's wall project is estimated to cost about \$23 billion.

Democrats have called the wall immoral, ineffective and medieval.

Pelosi said Friday's meeting with Trump was "sometimes contentious" but that they agreed to continue talking.

"But we recognize on the Democratic side that we really cannot resolve this until we open up government and we made that very clear to the president," she said.

Credit rating agency Moody's said the shutdown will cause minimal US economic and credit market disruption but there could be a more severe impact on financial markets and the broad economy if the closure is protracted.

A Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll last

week showed that 50 percent of the public blames Trump for the shutdown and 7 percent blames Republican lawmakers, while 32 percent blames Democrats.

White House officials and congressional staffers will meet at 11 am EST (1600 GMT) on Saturday to try to end the impasse, White House spokesman Hogan Gidley said.

House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy told reporters that Trump had named Vice President Mike Pence, senior aide Jared Kushner and Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen to work over the weekend.

The partial shutdown is straining the country's immigration system, worsening backlogs in courts and complicating hiring for employers.

Federal agencies such as the Justice Department, Commerce Department and departments of Agriculture, Labor, Interior and Treasury have been hit by the shutdown.

House Ways and Means Committee chairman Richard Neal, a Democrat, asked the Internal Revenue Service in a letter on Friday to explain the possible effects of the shutdown on the upcoming tax filing season for millions of Americans.

Party expels

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Oikyafront, led by BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, yesterday visited the victim, who is now undergoing treatment at Noakhali Sadar Hospital. They assured her of staying by her side.

The 35-year-old woman was gang-raped in Subarnachar area in the early hours of December 31, allegedly by 10 to 12 AL activists.

According to the victim, the men entered her home by cutting the fence around her house. They then tied her husband and four children with ropes, after which they took the woman outside the house and raped her.

The victim also said the rapists threatened to kill her husband and children and torch their house if she told anyone about the rape.

The victim's husband, who was also injured, said the criminals left around 4:00am after beating his wife unconscious and taking Tk 40,000, some gold ornaments and other valuables with them.

The husband said the victim went to cast her vote around 11:00am on Sunday.

During that time, Ruhul allegedly insisted that she vote for the "boat". He allegedly tried to snatch the ballot paper as she said she would vote for the "sheaf of paddy". But the victim put the paper inside the box.

This made Ruhul furious and he threatened her, he said.

Talking to The Daily Star, the victim's brother-in-law said the woman had threatened him back.

After the rape incident, the victim's husband filed a case against nine people.

Police have so far arrested four -- Ibrahim Khalil Bechu, Badsha Alom Bashu, Sohel and Swapan.

Besides, police arrested three more people -- Ruhul Amin, Jasim Uddin and Hasan Ali Bulu -- after finding their involvement in the rape during primary investigation.

Meanwhile, police yesterday sought a seven-day remand for all seven arrestees, including Ruhul Amin.

A Noakhali court is expected to hear the remand petitions of five arrestees today.

The court would fix the date for hearing the remand petitions for Jasim Uddin and Hasan Ali Bulu later. The two were arrested on Friday and sent to jail yesterday.

The incident has triggered widespread protest and condemnation.

Different organisations yesterday demanded the highest punishment for the accused.

Samajtantrik Mohila Forum yesterday held a rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club in the capital and pressed for the highest punishment of the perpetrators.

The women chapter of Bangladesh Communist Party sought justice for the victim and demanded security for women and minorities across the country.

No running

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Shohag's case is not an isolated one.

Patients often face such hassles as pathological tests and radiological tests (X-ray, radiography, ultrasounds, CT scans, MRI etc) are done in separate units located away from the emergency wards.

Considering the situation, DMCH authorities have taken an initiative to set up all the test equipment under one roof, said Brig General AKM Nasir Uddin, director of DMCH.

"The new unit will be launched tomorrow [today]. It will initially function with 80 staffers although at least 300 people are needed to run it," Nasir said, adding, "We will raise the manpower to 150 soon."

Currently the radiological tests are done on the northern side of the hospital about 200 metres away from the emergency wards.

Blood and pathology tests are done in one corner while blood typing and cross-matching are done on the other side of the five-storey emergency building, also known as the "new building".

An operation theatre is located on the second floor of the building while the post-anesthesia care unit is on the first floor.

"We are bringing all facilities under one roof so that patients do not need to wander around. This kills time and worsens their condition," Nasir said.

Describing how the "full-fledged modern emergency service" would look, he said, "The orthopaedic department, neurosurgery, and relevant departments will be there to speed up the services. There will be a four-bed Intensive Care Unit (ICU) with ventilation facilities on the ground floor.

"At present there are two emergency OTs. Now there will be six and one Post Anesthesia Care Unit."

Major operations will be done in the newly built OTs, Nasir said, adding that 25 nurses had already been trained in this regard.

Between 1,200-1,400 patients are served at the DMCH emergency unit every day, according to the director.

"Once the new unit is launched, it is estimated that it will take a maximum of two hours to complete necessary tests and the primary treatment of each patient. They can be shifted to the relevant wards once stable," Nasir said.