

Cut off all support to Myanmar military

UN body urges international community

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (IFFM) has urged the international community to cut off all financial and other support to Myanmar's military. It said Myanmar's commanders need to be isolated and brought before a credible court to answer charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

In a statement in Geneva yesterday, IFFM Chairperson Marzuki Darusman said the measures were needed because Myanmar has not done enough to resolve the nation's conflicts and protect human rights, including those of over a million ethnic Rohingya

civilians who have been forced into exile.

"There has been no movement toward a resolution of the crisis," Darusman said at the conclusion of a 10-day visit to Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. A IFFM expert team visited the region since May 3.

During their visit, the IFFM experts met government officials, UN agencies, regional actors, humanitarian workers, and representatives from Chin, Kachin, Shan and Rakhine communities.

"The situation is at a total standstill," said Darusman.

Having faced military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine State, around

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AL to identify

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Hasina expressed anger at the infiltration of BNP-Jamaat men, according to party sources.

The AL high command asked the grassroots leaders to find out the "bad elements" in their local units and oust them from the party.

Besides, the AL is closely monitoring the activities of the new members to identify those who could do harm to the party, they said.

Even those AL leaders, who helped the "bad elements" join the party, will face action, added the sources.

The infiltration issue has been in discussion in the party forum for quite a while.

But the involvement of an AL leader in the murder of madrasa student Nusrat Ja-han Rafi in Feni's Sonagazi upazila prompted the party to take immediate measures to address the issue.

Ruhul Amin, Sonagazi upazila AL president, joined the AL from the Jatiya Party in 1997 and later left the country for Saudi Arabia. He returned in 2009 and got actively involved in AL activities. He became president of Sonagazi AL unit last year.

"It is a disgrace for the party. The Awami League has enough supporters. There is no need to bring in more people from other parties to strengthen it," an AL central committee member told this newspaper, seeking anonymity.

The leader claimed that at least 20 percent of the infiltrators got party posts at the grassroots level. They also managed to get the party symbol to contest the local government elections and eventually won the polls.

Last week, Yusuf Ali, Gohail union AL president in Bogura, was assaulted by Atoar Talukder Fazu, chairman of Gohail union. Atoar joined the AL in 2016 after failing to get BNP nomination for chairman post in

local government polls.

"I have never been harassed like this in my long political career. The most regretful thing is that I was assaulted and humiliated by those who joined my party from the BNP," said an emotional Yusuf Ali while talking to local journalists recently.

Atoar drew the media's attention in October last year when his men removed around 10,000 bricks from a 200-metre stretch of a road in his union and used those to build his own structure.

Talking to The Daily Star, Mahbubul Alam Hanif, acting general secretary of the AL, said his party is identifying the bad elements.

"We will identify them and then go for action," he said.

BNP and Jamaat men started joining the AL after the party came to power in 2008. But it became more frequent after the AL won the 2014 national polls, which was boycotted by most of the political parties, including the BNP and the Jamaat-e-Islami.

According to media reports, around 25,000 leaders and activists from the BNP, and about 5,000 from the Jamaat joined the AL since 2009.

The AL has no specific data on how many opposition men joined the party.

They joined the ruling party apparently to get their names off "politically motivated cases" and avoid police harassment as numerous cases were filed against them over street violence during the BNP-led alliance's demonstrations since 2013.

But now AL leaders are sceptical about the motives of these new members, especially former Jamaat and BNP men. They think these people joined the ruling party for personal gains.

Some ruling party leaders said these former BNP and Jamaat men may try to harm the party unity.



Guards at a shed set up on the char of the Padma in Rajshahi city's Sreerampur area. The Rajshahi prison authorities plan to build Prisons Training Academy complex on around 100 acres of land of the river. The photo was taken early this month.

PHOTO: STAR

Move on to grab Padma char

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the 100-acre char land and the process to get the ministry's approval was at the final stage.

Deputy Inspector General of Prisons in Rajshahi Altob Hossain said they proposed to the land ministry for the lease. He, however, declined to go into details of the process.

Contacted, Sebastin Rema, deputy secretary of the land ministry, on Sunday said the ministry was yet to receive any such proposal.

But this correspondent saw some official documents that suggest the prison authorities sought the land from the ministry more than once showing it as a "newly emerged char".

Locals say the land remains submerged during the rainy season.

"The site was selected as no other suitable place was found," the DIG prisons told this correspondent at his office on May 2.

He said they wanted to build the academy by the river, and its playground and combat training ground on the 100-acre river land.

Any construction on the river land would require some activities like river training and river filling to stop the inundation of the areas below the city protection and flood control embankment, added the official.

Citing Bangladesh Land Management Manual 1990, Rajshahi ADC (revenue) Alamgir Kabir said any river char -- even if it emerges afresh -- would be absolutely owned by the government.

The prison authorities have some 2.08 acres of char recorded in their name in the Revisional Survey but the government would be the owner of the land as per the law, he said.

Rajshahi Deputy Commissioner SM Abdul Kader says the government has the authority to lease out the land, but he has no idea about any process of land acquisition by the prison authorities.

He said it was learnt that the jail authorities were claiming some land in the river but he didn't know how much has been occupied.

"In Rajshahi, we noticed some private ownership claims over river land. In other parts of the country, river land is owned solely by the government."

Last month, the prison authorities started felling trees of a forest in the area for construction of the academy complex. After cutting down 66 trees, they backed off amid protest from locals.

The forest is known to have some 100-year-old trees.

The prison officials say there are about 5,000 trees on the Rajshahi Central Jail's property where construction of the academy's infrastructure was underway. They marked some 800 trees for felling to make room for the infrastructure.

The DIG prisons says they would consider keeping the old trees untouched while constructing the academy buildings.

The country had no other training facility for prison officials and guards before 1995 when the Prisons Training Academy was established in Rajshahi. After a hectic lobbying, it got the government approval in August 2014.

Since its inception, the academy has been functioning with accommodation support from the Rajshahi Central Jail.

On the jail's property, the academy's commandant has an office in a three-room one-storey building while there are three corrugated iron sheet buildings for trainees to stay and another for holding classes.

The academy offers physical, theoretical, and combat trainings for the prison officials and guards. So far, it held basic training courses for six batches of jail superintendents, 10 batches of deputy jailors, and 42 batches of male and female prison guards.

Due to lack of infrastructure, the academy sometimes holds training courses at other facilities. For example, it conducted a basic training course for prison guards at Kashimpur Jail in Gazipur in 2016.

In June 2015, the Ecnc approved a Tk 73.42-crore project for constructing

infrastructures for the academy on the land of Rajshahi Central Jail.

The prison compound is on 18.8819 acres, which is part of 65.4070 acres of the jail's property. Out of the rest 46.5251 acres, the authorities have allotted 37.1335 acres for the academy.

The Public Works Department began constructing the academy's infrastructure dividing the work into 12 packages in 2016.

Construction of the administrative building, academic block, barracks for male and female trainees, quarters and dormitories for officials and staffers is going on. Floating of tender is underway for water supply, electrification, fire-fighting and tree plantation.

The prison authorities have also proposed a 443-strong organogram for the academy to the home ministry.

According to some official documents this correspondent managed to see, it was around the same time the Ecnc approved the project, the prison authorities proposed acquiring the 100-acre river land. And another proposal was sent in May last year.

During a visit to Sreerampur, this correspondent saw that the prison authorities have put up more than half a dozen signboards on the flood control embankment of the river. The signboards declare the river land by the embankment as the proposed site for the academy.

Two of the signboards carried description of the already occupied four acres of the river land.

Below the embankment and towards the river on the south, the authorities demarcated a huge portion of the river land using bamboo poles with red and yellow flags, and set up a checkpoint in the middle.

A sentry deployed there said the checkpoint has been in place since February 2017.

"You've to occupy your own land," the DIG prisons said, claiming that records show the four-acre river land belongs to them.

MIGRANT BOAT CAPSIZE

Identity of eight more Bangladeshis confirmed

OUR CORRESPONDENTS, Sylhet and Moulvibazar

Identities of eight more Bangladeshis feared dead in Thursday's Mediterranean Sea boat capsized have been confirmed.

All of them are from Sylhet division. Family members, OCs of local police stations, and union council heads confirmed the names to this paper yesterday.

Among the victims, Abdul Muqtadir and Abdul Quaiyum are from Habiganj's Lokra village, Abul Kasher is from Bagha Uttar village in Sylhet's Golapganj. All are aged 22.

The rest are Dulal Miah, 32, of Shimultala village in Bishwanath upazila of Sylhet, Rezwanul Islam Khokon of Nowgar Majhpara village in Bishwanath upazila, Shoyeb Ahmed Tuhin, 20, of Adinagad Chelakhani village, Abdul Halim Sujon of Majikapon village in Bhiyanibazar upazila, Sylhet, and Azizur Rahman Rukul, 27, of Kaliar Gaon in Moulvibazar sadar.

Families of Abdul Muqtadir and Abdul Quaiyum said, Mamun Miah, a survivor who had gone to Tunisia from Lokra village, had confirmed them of the two deaths over phone.

"If our children are dead, we demand their bodies be traced and handed over to us," said Quaiyum's father Alaud-din.

"Two boats -- one carrying around 50 and another 70 people -- set out at the same time on May 9. The first one possibly reached Italy while the second one capsized," ASM Ashraful Islam, labour counsellor of Bangladesh Embassy in Tripoli, told UNB.

Around 40-45 Bangladesh nationals remain missing after Friday's boat capsized in the Mediterranean Sea while attempting to reach Europe from Libya, he said.

On Monday, Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) published names of 27 Bangladeshis victims. So far, The Daily Star has obtained names of 15 victims from the Sylhet division who are feared dead.

On Monday, it obtained seven names: Ahsan Habib Shamim, 23, of Bade Bhukshimile village, Moulvibazar, Abdul Aziz, 25, his cousin Ahmed Hossain, 24, and Liton Miah, 24, of Muhidpur village in Fenchuganj upazila, Sylhet, Kamran Ahmed Maruf, 22, and Afzal Mohammad of Kodupur and Haortola village in Sylhet's Golapganj upazila, and Ayaz Ali of Belkona village in Fenchuganj, Sylhet.

All of them were dead, claimed their families who said they got phone calls from survivors in Tunisia.

BDRCS is coordinating with the Tunisian Red Crescent, foreign ministry and International Organisation for Migration in identifying the victims.

Rights body Ain o Salish Kendra has called for effective and coordinated efforts at the national level to prevent recurrence of tragic deaths of Bangladeshi fortune seekers.

In a press statement published yesterday, it urged the authorities concerned to identify gangs that manipulate people to illegally migrate.

BJMC burdened with losses

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grade and 15 percent low-grade SMR category of jute. Other types of jute make up the remaining 14 percent, said BJMC General Manager Mohammad Mohiuddin Sadek.

Its overall purchase price though tends to be higher than the average wholesale price of raw jute.

For instance, in fiscal 2015-16 it bought one quintal (100 kilogram) of raw jute at Tk 4,819. But the average wholesale price of one of the best quality jute (white/top tosa) was Tk 4,416 per quintal then, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

Its purchase the following year followed the same pattern: it had bought one quintal of jute for Tk 4,713, when the average wholesale price of white/top tosa was around Tk 4,000.

Sadek blamed the discrepancy on the cuts taken by middlemen. "Such situation occurs when we cannot buy during the peak harvesting season for fund shortage," he said.

However, in its audit for fiscals 2011-12 and 2012-13, the Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh (CAG) found anomalies in jute purchase by a section of BJMC officials.

There is involvement of various interest and vested groups in jute purchase at the local level, due to which quality jute cannot always be purchased at the fair market value, according to Nasim.

LOW PRODUCTIVITY
Out of 10,835 looms, 4,452 looms in mills under the BJMC are in operation. However, productivity is falling as the mills are run with old machinery, which were mostly bought before the liberation of Bangladesh.

And no modernisation took place since then.

Subsequently, the efficiency of BJMC mills is now below 50 percent, it said.

"The BJMC will never be able to sustain with its existing machineries," said Shahidullah Chowdhury, a veteran labour leader of the jute sector, adding

that all its machineries have to be upgraded to cut down on production costs and improve productivity.

This may lead to a reduction in the number of workers but the BJMC will be able to sustain, he said.

HIGHER PRODUCTION COST
The BJMC data showed that its production cost has been rising over the years. But, its production was declining.

For instance, in fiscal 2010-11, the corporation produced 1.66 lakh tonnes of jute goods at Tk 90,201 per

tonne. The production cost will soar more once the corporation implements the national wage scale 2015 that fixed Tk 8,300 as the minimum wage for state-mill workers.

To implement that from July, a proposal will be forwarded to the government for allocation in the budget for fiscal 2019-20.

"The government itself has announced the new wage scale. If it wants to run the BJMC, it should allocate the fund in the budget. There is no alternative to this," he added.

Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue and a keen follower of the jute industry, said the BJMC would be unable to sustain the increased wages given its continuing losses.

SALES BELOW PRODUCTION COST
While the BJMC's production cost rose 40 percent, it hiked the overall prices of jute goods by 11 percent to Tk 95,713 per tonne during the period.

The corporation increased the export price by 9 percent in the seven years to Tk 86,545 per tonne in fiscal 2017-18. And over at home, it sold one tonne of jute goods at Tk 128,020 in fiscal 2017-18, up 11.57 percent from seven years earlier.

And yet its sales prices at both home and abroad since fiscal 2010-11 have been below its production cost.

Falling export
Despite selling jute goods at much below its production cost in the global market, the BJMC has been registering falling exports.

The corporation's shipment tumbled to 86,740 tonnes in fiscal 2017-18 from 2.23 lakh tonnes in fiscal 2000-01. Its exports, both in terms of value and volume, nosedived further -- 79 percent year-on-year -- in the first six months of fiscal 2018-19.

India, Sudan, Thailand, Iran and Syria were the top five markets for the BJMC's jute goods in fiscal 2012-13. Save for Sudan, it has been witnessing falling exports in all.

The BJMC's shipment to India, Syria, Iran, Egypt and Indonesia slumped to 13,301 tonnes in fiscal

2017-18 from 49,407 tonnes in fiscal 2015-16.

In its annual report for fiscal 2017-18, the BJMC said it has become tough to fix competitive prices for jute goods thanks to its high production cost as a result of increased wages and declining efficiency of machines.

The fast-declining efficiency of machines has also emerged as a stumbling block for the state mills in ensuring timely delivery and meeting the requirements of buyers, it said.

Apart from these problems, its

international markets," he said, while recommending the state corporation to revisit its pricing policy for both the domestic and export markets.

Inadequate local sales
The BJMC data showed that its sales of jute including sacking bags rose to 44,320 tonnes in fiscal 2015-16 owing to enforcement of mandatory jute packaging law by the government.

Its domestic sales, however, slumped to 25,418 tonnes in fiscal 2017-18.

"Our losses will be reduced to a large extent if our local demand increases," the BJMC chairman said.

As a result of low sales in both the domestic and international markets, the BJMC was sitting on heaps of hessian, sacking and other jute goods, the value of which is Tk 755 crore until January this year, according to its estimate.

Lack of professionals in the management

Apart from this, lack of experience of top management officials is another reason behind the BJMC's poor performance.

The management, chairman and directors are usually brought in from civil service to run the organisation, meaning they do not have substantial experience and knowledge of the industry, said insiders.

"The majority of the officials at the decision-making level were deputed from other departments. This caused serious problems in a corporate entity," Moazzem said.

Besides, most of the senior officials stay here for less than one year. "In corporate standards, it is not acceptable. It creates a situation of lack of accountability and fosters inefficiency," he added.

In a note on BJMC in July 2015, former finance minister AMA Muhith blamed the weakness in government's management for the poor condition of the state mills.

"The burden of losses will only rise if funds are given without changing the existing system of management," he said.



tonne. In fiscal 2017-18, it churned out 1.32 lakh tonnes but at Tk 126,286 each tonne -- up 40 percent in seven years.

BJMC officials blamed the falling productivity of machineries and higher wages than their counterparts at private mills for the spiralling production costs.

In 2010, the corporation implemented the government-announced national wage scale for workers in state-owned mills, which was -- higher than that of private mills.

Under the 2010 wage scale, it has to pay Tk 4,150 as minimum wage, in contrast to Tk 2,700 at private jute mills.