

BANGLADESH UPDATE



2,187
New cases in 24hrs



5,64,939
Total cases



8,624
Deaths



5,17,523
Recoveries



2,697,376
Deaths



122,183,096
Total cases

Confusion reigns over Salim's JS fate

HC upholds his graft sentence, but no judgment clarifies which court's sentence can cost him his seat

ASHUTOSH SARKAR

The recent High Court verdict upholding 10 years' imprisonment for Haji Md Salim has sparked a debate over his parliamentary membership and the careers of several other convicted politicians, whose appeals are still pending with this court and the Appellate Division.

On March 9, an HC bench affirmed a lower court's verdict that convicted and sentenced the ruling Awami League lawmaker to 10 years in prison in a corruption case filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission during the rule of military-backed caretaker regime in 2007.

Following the announcement of the judgment, ACC lawyer Khurshid Alam Khan told The Daily Star that Salim could no longer remain an MP as per Article 66(2)(d) of the constitution.

According to Article 66 (2)(d), "A person shall be disqualified for election as, or for being, a member of parliament who has been, on conviction for a criminal offence involving moral turpitude, sentenced to imprisonment for a term of not less than two years, unless a period of five years has elapsed since his release."

This applies to sentences by any court, Khurshid said, adding that the Jatiya Sangsad Speaker can take necessary steps to cancel the parliament membership of Haji Salim following the HC verdict.

This provision means someone like Salim, who was initially sentenced to 13 years in prison on two charges -- 10 years for graft and three more years for concealing information -- in 2008, would not be able to contest parliamentary elections or hold the office of a member of parliament until five years after serving his jail sentence.

The HC bench on March 9 acquitted him of the charge of concealing information.

Haji Salim's lawyer Sayed Ahmed Raza, however, said his client would move an appeal before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, challenging the HC verdict.

"My client's parliamentary membership will stay as the issue will be finally settled by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court," he said.

Eminent legal expert Dr Shahdeen Malik told this correspondent that there is no judgment yet clarifying which court's verdict -- that of the trial court, the appeal court (HC), or the final court (Appellate Division) -- should be considered for cancelling the Jatiya Sangsad membership of a convicted lawmaker.

However, it is normal practice in the country that parliamentary membership of a person does not get scrapped until the issue of his or her conviction is settled by the apex court, he said.

Shahdeen Malik said Haji Salim continued being a lawmaker after the lower court handed him 13 years'



imprisonment in 2008, as his appeal against the judgement remained pending with the HC.

Awami League leaders MK Alamgir and Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya were also convicted by lower courts, but their parliamentary

memberships were not cancelled as their appeals are pending with the appeals court, he added.

Meanwhile, ACC counsel Khurshid Alam Khan told this correspondent that only eight appeals, including that of Haji Salim, out of 27 have been disposed of by the HC in around six years after the apex court overturned acquittals of the accused in corruption cases filed during the rule of the military-backed caretaker regime.

Between January 2014 and June 2015, the Appellate Division had scrapped the HC acquittals of 35 people, mostly politicians and their family members, and ordered the HC to expeditiously hold re-hearings of their appeals against convictions handed down by the lower courts.

Among them, former AL Relief and Disaster Management Minister Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya and former BNP lawmaker Monjurul Ahsan Munshi were acquitted by the HC on rehearing of their appeals.

Former BNP lawmaker Hafiz Ibrahim's three years' imprisonment was upheld by the HC on rehearing his appeal and he has already served his jail sentence.

Hafiz Ibrahim's lawyer Sabir Hamza Chowdhury told The Daily Star that his client had been declared qualified for contesting the last parliamentary election.

In November 2017, the HC commuted jail terms for former BNP minister Nazmul Huda from seven to four years and ruled that his wife Sigma Huda's three years' jail sentence would be considered as served out because she had earlier served time in this case.

The HC upheld a lower court verdict that sentenced BNP leader and former state minister for civil aviation Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin to 13 years and his son Mir Helal Uddin to three years in jail.

Nazmul Huda, Mir Nasir, and Mir Helal are now on bail granted by the apex court as they surrendered to the trial court in line with the HC verdicts.

The other accused whose acquittals were cancelled by the top court include former BNP state minister Amanullah Aman and his wife Sabera Aman, former AL lawmaker Joyntal Abedin Hazari, Hafiz Ibrahim's wife Mafruz Sultana, former AL lawmaker Mookbul Hossain (now deceased) and his wife Fatema Tahera Khanam, former commissioner of customs Jahurul Haque and his wife Afa Haque, and former Islami Oikya Jote lawmaker Mufti Shahidul Islam (now deceased), according to ACC lawyer Khurshid.

Charge sheet

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Mollah of Detective Branch of police, the investigation officer, filed the charge sheet with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka on March 14.

This was the second charge sheet to be filed against Kajol, who is accused in three cases under the Digital Security Act, all of which were filed by ruling party members.

They had filed the cases with Kamrangirchar, Hazariabagh, and Sher-e-Bangla police stations. The charge sheet submitted yesterday was that of the case filed with Kamrangirchar police station, while the charge sheet of the case lodged with the Hazariabagh station was given on February 4.

The charge sheet stated that Kajol published fake news on his Facebook account regarding the arrest and alleged crimes of expelled Jubo Mahila League leader Shamima Nur Papia.

It said that at the time when Kajol circulated false information on his Facebook, Jubo Mahila League leader Shamima Nur Papia was arrested, expelled, and the district Jubo Mahila League committee was dissolved.

The charge sheet alleged that Kajol made a Facebook post, saying that Sumaiya Chowdhury Bonya was one of Papia's accomplices "in her illegal business of women and drugs".

Following the post, Bonya, a member of the central committee of Bangladesh Jubo Mahila League, a body of the ruling Awami League, lodged the case with Kamrangirchar Police Station on March 11 last year.

He sent vulgar texts and pornography to various Facebook IDs, the charge sheet alleged.

Kajol also uploaded indecent, defamatory, and objectionable



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and President of the Maldives Ibrahim Mohamed Solih talk during a meeting at the Prime Minister's Office in the capital yesterday. Solih left Dhaka last night ending his two-day visit to Bangladesh.

PHOTO: PTD

Biman to fly Dhaka-Male

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Ibrahim Solih at the Prime Minister's Office.

During his talks with the Bangladesh PM, Solih announced that they would protect the rights of the Bangladeshi migrants working in the Maldives and that they were being covered under the Covid-19 vaccination campaign free of cost.

"We have a very cordial relationship with the Maldives. We have achieved a lot during the visit of the president," Momen said.

The Maldives president, his wife Madam Fazna Ahmed, Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdullah Shahid and Economic Development Minister Fayyaz Ismail arrived in Dhaka on Wednesday to join the twin celebrations of Mujib Borsho and golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence.

Solih also attended a dinner hosted by President Abdul Hamid before leaving for Malé last night.

Momen said the two countries signed four MoUs on the Establishment of Joint Commission for Comprehensive Cooperation; Establishment of Bilateral Foreign Office Consultations; Cooperation in the Field of Fisheries and Pelagic Fishing; and Cultural Exchange Programme for 2022-25.

"These instruments are expected to pave the way for further strengthening

the relations between the two countries," he said.

The minister said presently, the trade between the two countries is very limited but there are huge scopes. Bangladesh can export food, vegetables as well as medicines to the Maldives. Besides, the two countries can also cooperate with each other in the sectors of tourism and marine fisheries.

RMG, leather, IT services and processed food can be very important items of export, officials said.

Abdulla Shahid said Bangladesh is a land of enormous resources, but the problem is lack of connectivity.

"If we have strong connectivity, trade can grow greatly. We welcome two million tourists every year. It is a high-end consumption market. For economic activities, more connectivity is a welcome declaration," he said.

The Maldives is home to some 100,000 Bangladeshi migrants, but many of them are undocumented. Asked about it, Shahid said his country was doing everything to ensure their protection so that none can take any undue advantage of their irregular status.

Bangladesh requested the Maldives rapid regularisation of the migrant workers there and expressed its readiness to meet further need for skilled human resources in the Maldives.

Act before it's too late

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The last time the country recorded a higher positivity rate was on December 13, 2020, 10.63 percent of samples tested positive for coronavirus.

Prof Rahman stressed on increasing the daily testing capacity.

"Unless we increase the number of tests to one or two lakh, we will never know the level of transmission. With inadequate tests, a lockdown or any other measures will hardly work," said Rahman, adding that testing helps mitigation efforts as it equips investigators with the requisite knowledge to examine the characteristics, prevalence and spread of any disease.

According to the DGHS, RT-PCR labs across the country have the capacity to test around 50,000 samples every day.

The rise of infections has also coincided in a decline in numbers of people getting vaccinated. A total of 1,07,433 people were vaccinated yesterday, raising the total number of people vaccinated to 46,87,824.

During the first and second weeks of the countrywide vaccination campaign that started on February 7, an average of 1.5 lakh people took the vaccines daily.

Amid the growing alarm, Health Minister Zahid Maleque yesterday urged people to maintain health safety guidelines.

Fearing the fresh surge of transmission, likely linked to the two highly transmissible strains of the virus originating in the UK and South Africa, the DGHS has recently gave a 12-point suggestion to the government, including a complete lockdown.

The health minister, however, said all the government agencies will take

collaboratively decide on the lockdown. "While we want [that] the economy of the country remains stable, we also want [that] the transmission does not rise... But we [health ministry] cannot decide on lockdown. All the government agencies will decide collaboratively on it," said Zahid Maleque.

He said lockdown would be the last resort for the government if people continue to defy health guidelines.

"In the beginning, we knew nothing about coronavirus. Now we know how to fight it, but we are not maintaining the health safety guidelines... If health safety guidelines are maintained, there will be no need of lockdown. We have suggested, now the government [high-ups] will decide," the minister said.

About mass gatherings in social events, the minister said, "At least 20 lakh people visited Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and Rangamati in the last 15 days. Nobody wore masks. [People] are participating in marriage ceremony without wearing masks."

He also urged people to be patient. "It is not the right time for going on tours. Be patient [for] a bit more. If [you] stay alive, [you] will be able to go on tours."

IGP FOR STRICTER ENFORCEMENT Meanwhile, Bangladesh Police yesterday said they will intensify efforts to ensure people are maintaining health guidelines.

"We are witnessing a sudden rise of coronavirus infections in the month of March again. Already around 16,000 people got infected in the month at an average of 1,000 daily, whereas the figure was only 11,061 in February," said Benazir Ahmed, Inspector General of Police (IGP), yesterday.

Pollutants 10 times the limit in winter

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potential at the hospitals' environment in Dhaka, Bangladesh."

According to a global report published on Wednesday, air quality of Bangladesh was the worst in the world, while its capital Dhaka was the second worst air polluted city last year.

The study on the three health care institutions was conducted by health care professionals and academicians in two periods -- pre-monsoon and winter. It found that air quality remains worse during both the periods.

For example, the average concentration of PM 2.5 at the three healthcare institutions was 52.28 µg/m3 during pre-monsoon which is double than the NAAQS permissible limit.

In winter, the average concentration of PM 2.5 was 222.53 µg/m3 which is around eight times higher than the NAAQS permissible limit, the report said.

The WHO's ambient air quality permissible standard is 25 µg/m3 while it is 55 µg/m3 for NAAQS.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Prof Abdus Salam, key author of the study and also a chemistry teacher at Dhaka University, said indoor air quality worsens due to various activities of the people and it indicates the unhygienic condition at hospitals.

To improve the indoor air quality at

government hospitals, the authorities concerned should focus on the overall hygiene situation and reduce crowding by patient's attendants at hospitals, he added.

The first-of-its-kind study on indoor air quality of hospitals in the country also said toxicity potential (TP) values at the three installations were 10 times higher than normal, which means the environment there could aggravate patients' health.

The TP indicates the overall environment of a place.

"Extremely high TP values indicated potential severe health consequences of the healthcare professionals and patients in indoor hospitals environment," the report said.

The children's surgery ward site showed higher particulate matter (PM) concentrations than other indoor sampling locations at the DMCH. The ward was most crowded and filthy among all the sites in the hospital, the study found.

It also said unhygienic environment and movement of people increased outdoor particulate concentrations inside the hospitals.

Prof Salam said proper ventilation can improve the air quality inside the hospitals, adding that cooking inside the wards should be stopped.

Abdulla Shahid said the Maldives will support Bangladesh on the question of the Rohingya justice and repatriation in the international forums. Also, both the countries will work together on climate change.

According to a joint communique, the two governments agreed to regularly hold commerce secretary-level meetings to address bilateral trade issues in detail. Both the sides agreed to expedite the finalisation of the proposed Agreement on Customs Cooperation and the signing of the Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and protect investments.

Bangladesh reiterated its policy of extending continued support towards development of human resources in the Maldives in a variety of fields, and offer training to the Maldivian peacekeepers in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh confirmed its support to the Maldives foreign minister's candidature for the UNGA presidency in 2021.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accepted President Solih's invitation to pay a visit to the Maldives at a mutual convenience.

Solih commended Hasina's leadership and success and the vision of transforming Bangladesh into a developed country by 2041.

ATTACK ON NAVY OFFICER

Erfan Salim gets bail

No legal bar left for his incarceration

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday granted bail to Erfan Salim, son of Dhaka-7 lawmaker Haji Md Salim, in a case filed over attacking a navy officer in the capital's Dhanmondi in October last year.

The bench of Justice Jahangir Hossain Selim and Justice Md Badruzzaman delivered the verdict after hearing a petition filed by Erfan seeking bail in the case.

There is no legal bar for Erfan to walk out of jail following the HC judgment, his lawyer Sayed Ahmed Raza told The Daily Star.

He said his client is accused in five cases and he secured bail from the courts in three cases and police gave final reports exempting him from charges in the other two.

Erfan will get released from a Kashimpur jail after the copy of the HC verdict reached the jail, the lawyer added.

On January 27 this year, the HC bench issued a rule asking the state to explain as to why Erfan, now in jail, should not be granted bail in the case.

Lt Wasif Ahmed Khan of Bangladesh Navy filed the case with Dhanmondi Police Station on October 25, against Erfan, 37, and three others -- AB Siddique Dipu, 45, Md Zahid, 35, and Md Mizanur Rahman, 30, for attacking him.

A team of Rapid Action Battalion conducted a drive at Erfan's house in Old Dhaka and arrested him the same day.

Deputy Attorney General Md Bashir Ullah, who represented the state during hearing of the bail petition, told The Daily Star that the state will move an appeal before the Supreme Court's Appellate Division challenging the HC judgment.

5 lakh to sit for BCS

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it mandatory for all candidates to wear masks and maintaining physical distance at exam halls. It also asked all job seekers to maintain physical distance while entering and leaving the exam centres.

PSC Chairman Sohorab Hossain told The Daily Star yesterday afternoon that everything was set for the exam.

"We will hold the exam amid strict adherence to Covid-19 health guidelines," he added.

The two-hour exam will start from 10:00am.

Around 4.75 lakh candidates applied for the exam after the 41st BCS circular was published in November 2019 to appoint 2,018 vacant posts in different cadres.

Among the 351 centres in seven divisions, there are many centres where 3,000-4,000 candidates will sit for the exam.

On Tuesday, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) proposed that the government not reopen educational institutions and hold any public examinations, including BCS, in the wake of the rising number of Covid-19 patients.

In Tuesday's meeting at the Prime Minister's Office, the DGHS officials also suggested going for a complete lockdown to curb transmission.

The high-ups at the PMO, however, opined that the authorities concerned will make a decision on such issues and asked the DGHS to strengthen enforcement of health safety guideline and reopen the Covid-19 hospitals that were shut down earlier.

In this context, there has been discussion on social media about whether tomorrow's examinations would be held or not.

"We have only one day left before the exams. We have sent question papers and other logistics to different exam centres. Examinees have also come to the divisional cities. It is tough to stop the exam now," Shahjahan Ali Mollah, a member of PSC, said Wednesday night.

In the last several days, the transmission of novel coronavirus had been gradually rising every day with experts fearing spread of the new strains of novel coronavirus, including those first detected in the UK and South Africa.

Ekushey Boi Mela

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There are also four emergency shelters at the Suhrawardy Udyan.

Alongside all the necessary health precautions, there are strict security arrangements in the venue to prevent any unpleasant incidents.

The traditional Amar Ekushey Boi Mela began informally in 1972 at the Bangla Academy premises. However, the academy officially took the responsibility to arrange the fair every year since 1978.