

Dhaka appoints lobbying firm to 'deepen' ties with Washington

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh has recently appointed a US lobbying firm for a year to deepen Dhaka's ties with Washington, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Md Shahriar Alam said yesterday.

He said the firm has been hired at a monthly payment of \$20,000 [Tk 17,19,915]. [One dollar was equivalent to Tk 86 yesterday].

"This is just to confirm that we've recently appointed Nelson Mullins to maintain government-to-government relations. It's a GR [government relations] firm," he told reporters at his office.

He hoped the relations between the two countries would be strengthened through the appointment of the GR firm in a very transparent manner.

Shahriar said this is a public document and anybody can access it for further details.

The move comes after the recent US sanctions on Rab and seven of its current and former officials.

While talking to a small group of reporters at his office on February 22, the state minister said they had talked to three firms and indicated a decision might come within a week.

He also said they have enough capacity to tackle the matter [sanctions] - either on the legal front or on the diplomatic one - and added the government does not want to involve a third country in this process.

The state minister said Bangladesh and the United States would see more engagements through a number of bilateral platforms, including "Partnership Dialogue", in the coming months.

Earlier, Bangladesh expressed its "discontent" over the sanctions imposed by the US Departments of Treasury and of State.

Bangladesh says the decision was taken "unilaterally" by the US administration without any prior consultation with the government of Bangladesh.

Dhaka also underscored the need for pursuing the pathway of dialogue, engagement and collaboration.



Shahriar Alam

Shahriar hopes the relations between the two countries will be strengthened through the appointment of the firm.



A man tries to salvage whatever is left of burnt books at a shop in the capital's Nilkhet book market yesterday. A fire in the market on Tuesday evening damaged at least 40 such shops, some of which were completely gutted, said fire officials.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Once deceived, he starts a racket

Gang formed by migrant worker cons outbound passengers, promising negative Covid test report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rab arrested 14 members of a gang that used to cheat outbound passengers in the name of providing them with negative Covid-19 reports needed for going abroad.

This way, the gang conned them of several crores of taka.

They were held from Dhaka and other districts on Wednesday night after many victims complained to different hospital authorities, Khandaker Al Moin, Rab's legal and media wing director, told a press conference yesterday.

The arrestees are Belal Hossain, Sobuj Mia, Jasim Uddin, Sultan Mia, Abul Hossain, Abdul Nur, Afzal Mia, Shamim, Ahmed Hossain, Emran Uddin, Abdur Rashid, Abdul Karim Chowdhury, Angur Mia and Alamgir Hossain.

Moin said Belal, who was in Oman, formed the gang after he was deceived by a fraudster in March last year.

He told Rab that he underwent Covid-19 tests, a prerequisite for going abroad at that time, at a Cumilla hospital before leaving for Oman.

A man who said he was a doctor



Belal Hossain

at the hospital told Belal that his test result came positive but promised to make it negative in exchange for Tk 10,000.

Belal gave the money thinking he would fail to board the flight on time otherwise.

He could realise that he was cheated when the hospital authorities confirmed that he tested positive.

A month later, he underwent a second Covid-19 test when the result came negative and he left for Oman.

But before that he had shared his experience with his close friend Sobuj and pursued him to run a racket using similar tactics, the Rab official said.

Belal returned home four months

later and engaged another friend Jasim in the racket.

Rab officials said in the last 10 months Sobuj, once an auto-rickshaw driver, took Tk 10,000-15,000 from around 1,000 expatriates each and embezzled over Tk 1 crore, promising to provide them negative Covid-19 reports from designated hospitals.

Besides, Belal amassed Tk 50 lakh from around 600 Bangladeshi expatriates while the remaining gang members each used to get Tk 25,000-30,000 a month.

The Rab official said some of the gang members went to different districts and visited hospitals designated for Covid-19 tests for outbound passengers, and collected phone numbers of expatriates.

Belal and Sobuj would call their numbers and tell them that their results came positive.

They then took money from them, promising to change the reports into negative ones, Rab official Moin said.

After getting money, they used to switch off their phone numbers. The hospital authorities used to send actual reports to the victims' numbers.

Rab said no hospital staffers are found to be involved with the racket.

Rab arrests 5 for killing AL man

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kustia

Rab has arrested five men accused of killing local Awami League leader Siddiqur Rahman in Bheramara upazila of the district on Friday.

Two of the suspects, Mintu Malitha and Roni Malitha, admitted their involvement in the murder, Rab said in a press release yesterday.

Siddiqur, 50, was the general secretary of a local AL committee in Chandgram area.

The suspects are also known in the area as AL activists. They had rivalry over exerting influence in the area.

Local AL leaders, however, maintain that Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal was behind the murder.

One sent to jail for raping woman with disability

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

A Moulvibazar court sent a man to jail yesterday on charges of raping a 20-year-old woman with disabilities in Kamalganj upazila.

Rashid Ali, 35, a timber trader, admitted to police that he had raped the woman on Monday.

She fell sick the next day and was admitted to a hospital the next day.

Her family filed a complaint at Kamalganj Police Station against Rashid on Wednesday.

4 sentenced to death for killing woman over dowry

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka tribunal yesterday sentenced a man and his three cohorts to death for killing his wife in Gopalganj in 2016.

The convicts are Morshed Nishan, Ehsan Shushan, Mohammad Hasan Sheikh and Anisur Rahman. Nishan is a fugitive since he walked out of jail on bail.

Judge Md Jakir Hossain of the Speedy Trial Tribunal 2 handed down the sentence in presence of three convicts in a packed courtroom.

The convicts had beaten Nishan's wife Jakia to death for dowry, according to the complaint.

Man jailed for killing 4-yr-old

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A Kishoreganj court yesterday sent a man to jail on charges of killing a four-year-old girl in Bhairab.

Sohel Mia, 35, admitted to police that he killed the girl after failing to have an affair with her mother, said Golam Mostafa, officer-in-charge of Bhairab Police Station.

In a case filed with the police station on Tuesday night, Zakir Hossain stated that he, his wife and daughter have been living in a rented house owned by Sohel for a few months.

Sohel had stalked his wife earlier and threatened to kill his daughter, added the statement.

On Tuesday night, he noticed that his daughter Nodi was missing and called the police.

Police found the girl's body in a bush hours later.

Leaving all behind

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owns a few shops in the capital.

About the situation on the streets, he said thousands of residents began fleeing the city after the emergency siren went off. Others hunkered down for cover, while streams of cars clogged the expressways.

With filling stations brimming with panicked residents, Mohon worried whether they would make it to the Polish border 900km away with the fuel he had left in his car.

"I am leaving everything behind - my house, businesses and vehicles. If we survive, we'll have to come back and start a new fight to keep living."

The Daily Star spoke to five Bangladeshi expatriates living in Kyiv. Three of them said they were heading for the Polish border while the other two said they were moving to safer places in Kyiv.

As Bangladesh currently does not have an embassy or a consulate in Ukraine, the Bangladesh embassy in Poland acts as Ukraine's de-facto diplomatic mission.

There is no readily available data on the number of Bangladeshis residing in Ukraine. However, Bangladeshi expatriates said there are some 2,500 of them, including 2,000 students. Around 500 live in Kyiv.

Abdul Awal, 45, has been living in Ukraine for 25 years. After completing his education there, he gradually became a resident. "The situation in Kyiv is

very alarming... We have packed our belongings and are planning to go to the Polish border," he told this newspaper yesterday noon.

Originally from Savar's Hemayetpur, Awal said, "I have a business here. I run a small shop. But right now, saving our lives is my first priority."

The father of two girls further said, "It is painful for me to make such a big decision - leaving home for an uncertain life ahead. I don't know what awaits us, but what else can I do except escaping to a safer place?"

Khaled Hasan Khan, another Bangladeshi from Tangail now living in Kyiv, said he has been living in Ukraine for 38 years and lives there with his wife, son and daughter.

"Earlier in the morning, the Ukrainian president imposed martial law... He advised people not to panic and asked citizens not to leave their homes, but people are flocking to the streets to get to safety... I'm not leaving [Ukraine]. I have been in this country for almost 40 years. I cannot leave the people of this country in this terrible situation. What happens to everyone will happen to me too. If everyone dies, I will die too."

Khaled said some shelters were set up in every area and he will go to one of those with his family. "Many cannot leave as they do not have valid papers and are living here as refugees," he said, adding, "Bhai, pray for us" before cutting the call.

Final names handed to president

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Committee submitted its report to the honourable president and he received it. Now he [president] will review it and give the next directives soon."

He said, "The gazette notification will be issued within a day or two."

When asked whether it would be published yesterday, he replied, "As soon as possible."

Asked whether the names will be published, he said, "The rule is to publish the names of five. You will know who will be appointed."

According to a Bangladesh press release, President Abdul Hamid commended and thanked the members of the search committee for their tireless efforts.

He hoped that based on

the recommendations of the committee, it would be possible to form a strong and acceptable election commission which would be able to conduct free and fair national and local elections.

After the panel met on Tuesday at the Supreme Court Judges' Lounge, meeting sources said, ex-bureaucrats, ex-army officials, former judges, university teachers and social workers made up the final nominations.

A source in the committee said for the post of the chief election commissioner, they proposed the names of two persons who do not have experience of serving in a bureaucratic post.

Sources close to development said the names discussed for the next EC are: former cabinet secretary

Musharraf Hossain Bhuiyan, former cabinet secretary Mohammad Shaful Alam, former secretary Habibur Awal, ex-army chief Iqbal Karim Bhuiyan, former Public Service Commission chairman Muhammed Sadique, former secretary Ujjwal Bikash Dutta, Justice (ret'd) Nazmun Ara Sultana, former Dhaka University VC AAMS Arefin Siddique, DU teacher Sadeka Halim, local government expert Tofail Ahmed, President of Fair Election Monitoring Alliance Munira Khan, economist Mansur Ahmed and former principal secretary Abdul Karim.

The Daily Star, however, could not verify those names independently. After formation of the search committee under the

"Appointments of the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Act-2022" on February 5, the panel asked political parties, professional bodies and individuals to submit their nominations.

The committee then received 322 names.

The committee held meetings with eminent citizens, media personalities, university teachers and election experts to learn their views and suggestions over formation of the Election Commission.

Following the recommendations of them, the search panel published all 322 names but it did not publish the names of the final nominations.

Sources in the meeting

said revealing the names before sending them to the president would be "discourteous", and some quarters may also create controversy over it.

The BNP and some other opposition parties did not propose any names, citing no confidence in the search committee.

Meanwhile, Transparency International Bangladesh in a statement demanded that the final nominations submitted to the president be published.

TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said, "We demand publishing the list of 10 nominations finalised by the search committee [as it] is in full compliance with the principles of transparency and impartiality prescribed by law."

BCL attacks

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More students rushed to the spot and chased the attackers away. At least 30 protesters were injured as both sides tried to take control of the area for nearly half an hour until police arrived and drove them away.

A seriously injured protester was taken to Khulna Medical College Hospital for better treatment.

Police have detained three youths for questioning in connection with the rape, said Manirul Islam, officer-in-charge of Gopalganj Kotwali Police Station.

Newton Molla, president of Gopalganj BCL, told reporters that no member of the organisation was involved in the attacks.

The detainees are: Piyal, 22, Antar, 22, and Jibon, 23.

Charter flights to relocate the Bangladeshis

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minister for foreign affairs, yesterday.

"We are in talks with the expatriates' welfare and overseas employment ministry and the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh. If need be, we will operate charter flights," he said.

Some 2,500 Bangladeshis reside across various states in Ukraine. Bangladesh embassy in Poland advised them to move to Poland's borders.

Bangladesh Ambassador to Poland, Sultana Laila Hossain, said they were creating WhatsApp groups to connect with them.

"We have created a group of 500 Bangladeshis," she added.

She also said they were

in talks with the Polish authorities to ensure temporary visas for the Bangladeshis leaving Ukraine.

Poland allows two-week transit visas in general. If the situation improves in Ukraine, Bangladeshis can return to Ukraine or they can go to Bangladesh, she said.

For those without passports, the Bangladesh embassy could issue travel permits to facilitate their travel to Poland, she said.

State Minister Shahriar Alam said anyone who needs help can contact the WhatsApp number +48527094381.

Officials from Bangladesh embassies in Germany and Italy will also move to Poland for

supporting the Bangladesh embassy in Poland for this emergency, he said.

Talking to The Daily Star, Mofizur Rahman, a Bangladeshi stranded in Ukraine, said he and four others headed towards Poland as they got to know that the country opened its border.

"We have all the documents with us and we expect to have access to Poland... The roads are heavily jammed by hundreds of vehicles. Our car could not move an inch for half an hour," Mofizur said at 6:30pm.

He also said he had to wait for two hours in a queue to get fuel for their vehicle.

Bangladeshis in Ukraine said those who live in the

Eastern Ukrainian states including Odessa, Donetsk and Luhansk were fearing more for the conflict as Russian attacks are mostly confined to those areas for now.

Mohammad Rizvi, a Bangladeshi student in Odessa, said they were stranded in the state as there was no car or flight available.

"There were blasts in parts of Odessa. We are afraid. Our university has asked us not to panic," he said, adding that they wish to move to countries like Poland.

According to him, there would be around 500 Bangladeshis - mostly students and businessmen - in Odessa.

Putin's move

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the east worried about the spillover from Russia's buildup of 150,000 troops on Ukraine's borders.

Ian Kelly, a former US ambassador to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), said Biden could have sought activation of the Nato Response Force and sent it into Poland and the Baltic states.

Analysts credit Biden with working with allies to prepare sanctions aimed at crippling the Russian economy. He persuaded Germany to freeze approvals for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

It remains to be seen

whether sanctions will get Putin to back down.

Biden's response could also have repercussions for US-China relations. There is concern if Biden appears too soft on Moscow, China could take it as acquiescence to act against self-ruled Taiwan.

Putin's defiance could give US Republicans a cudgel to use against Biden and his fellow Democrats in the November midterm congressional elections, which will decide the balance of power in Washington.

And Biden's strategy leading up to the Russian attack will come under closer scrutiny as he charts the path forward.