

TEACHER IN JAIL

Call for his release gets louder

STAR REPORT

Calls for freeing Hriday Chandra Mondal, the Munshiganj school teacher arrested in a case defaming Islam, are getting louder, with local and global rights organisations yesterday issuing statements demanding his release.

“It is outrageous that a teacher finds himself behind bars simply for voicing his opinion while teaching a class,” said Amnesty International in a statement yesterday.

On March 20, Mondal, an assistant teacher of Binodpur Ram Kumar High School in Munshiganj, was having a conversation with students about the difference between science and religion, during which he is said to have made derogatory comments on Islam.

Two days later, he was arrested after the school’s principal filed a case against him. Teachers should be free to discuss ideas and opinions of all kinds without fear of reprisals, said the London-based non-governmental organisation.

The detention has set a dangerous precedent, it said, while calling upon the authorities to take urgent measures to improve the conditions that allow people to express themselves freely and safely.

Mondal’s detention is “emblematic of a disturbing trend in Bangladesh where the space for free expression is rapidly shrinking” and “a shameful demonstration of the erosion of the human rights situation” in the country, Amnesty added.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) expressed deep concerns over the incident and went on to demand Mondal’s immediate release ensuring his treatment, compensation for harassment and justice.

Mondal has the right to get bail as he has been sued under section 295 (A) of The Penal Code, 1860. If anyone commits crimes under the section, a two-year jail time or fine or both can be applied.

“Considering that ground, it can be said that it is a bailable offence,” said the BLAST statement quoting its trustee member ZI Khan Panna, also a Supreme Court lawyer.

But his bail petition has been rejected twice.

Over in Shabbagh, a group of academicians, rights activists and social workers under the banner of ‘Nipirone biruddhe Shabbagh’ held a rally demanding Mondal’s release.

“We want to take forward the country with the development of science and technology. We want to extend our greetings to teachers like Hriday Chandra Mondal who are discharging their duties properly,” said Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, the renowned writer and academic while addressing the rally.

He demanded unconditional release of Mondal and withdrawal of the case against him.

“An evil force is trying to take back the country by misinterpreting the religion – we must resist the force to establish a secular Bangladesh,” said the rights activist Khushi Khabir.



Hundreds of people of the Hindu community bathe in the Shitalakkhya river in Langanbandh area of Narayanganj city as part of their preparation for pilgrimage. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: SANAD SAHA

Ukraine faces ‘hard battle’ in the east

Says Zelensky, calls for ‘firm global response’ to rail station attack

AGENCIES

Ukraine is ready for a tough battle with Russian forces amassing in the east of the country, President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday, a day after a missile attack in the east that officials said killed more than 50 civilians trying to evacuate.

Air-raid sirens sounded in cities across eastern Ukraine, which has become the focus of Russian military action following a withdrawal from areas close to the capital, Kyiv.

After Friday’s strike on a train station crowded with women, children and the elderly in the Donetsk region city of Kramatorsk, officials urged civilians in the neighbouring Luhansk region to flee.

“Yes, (Russian) forces are gathering in the east (of Ukraine),” Zelensky told a joint news conference with Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer in Kyiv.

“This will be a hard battle, we believe in this fight and our victory. We are ready to simultaneously fight and look for diplomatic ways to put an end to this war,” Zelensky added.

Russia’s invasion, which began on Feb 24, has forced more than 4 million people to flee abroad, killed or injured thousands, left a quarter of

the population homeless, and turned cities into rubble.

The civilian casualties have triggered a wave of international condemnation, in particular over the deaths in the town of Bucha, a town to the northwest of Kyiv that until last week was occupied by Russian forces. Russia has denied targetting civilians

**“This will be a hard battle, we believe in this fight and our victory.”**  
– President Zelensky

in what it calls a “special operation” to demilitarise and “denazify” its southern neighbour. Ukraine and Western nations have dismissed this as a baseless pretext for war.

Nehammer visited Ukraine a day after European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen - visits aimed at underlining the West’s support for Zelensky. In another such move, Italy said it would re-open its embassy in Kyiv after Easter.

Friday’s missile attack on the train station in Kramatorsk, a hub for civilians fleeing the east, left shreds of blood-stained clothes, toys and damaged luggage strewn across the station’s platform.

City Mayor Oleksander Honcharenko, who estimated 4,000 people were gathered there at the time, said that the death toll had risen to least 52.

“This is another Russian war crime for which everyone involved will be held accountable,” Zelensky said in a video message, referring to Friday’s missile strike, whose victims included five children.

“World powers have already condemned Russia’s attack on Kramatorsk. We expect a firm global response to this war crime,” he said.

Russia’s defence ministry denied responsibility, saying in a statement the missiles that struck the station were used only by Ukraine’s military and that Russia’s armed forces had no targets assigned in Kramatorsk on Friday.

Russian state television described the attack as a “bloody provocation” by Ukraine.

The Ukrainian military says Moscow is preparing for a thrust to try to gain full control of the Donbas regions of Donetsk and Luhansk that have been partly held by Moscow-

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NUSRAT MURDER

3yrs on, family awaits ‘final justice’

ASHUTOSH SARKAR

Three years have passed since Nusrat Jahan Rafi, a madrasa student in Feni, was set on fire and killed, but her family’s wait for final justice is yet to end due to lengthy legal procedures.

It may take another five years for the final settlement of her murder case at the High Court and then at the Appellate Division, unless the chief justice assigns an HC bench for early hearings on a priority basis, breaking the serial of the hearing of such cases.

The death reference (lower court documents) and the appeals, filed by those convicted in the Nusrat murder case, have been registered with the HC in 2019.

The HC, maintaining its serial, is now hearing and disposing of such documents that were registered in 2018.

Talking to The Daily Star on Friday, the victim’s mother Shirin Akter said, “We just want the High Court to hold a hearing and dispose of the case. We are waiting for final justice.

“We are, however, happy that the prime minister and law minister took prompt steps to complete the trial proceedings.”

Nusrat’s elder brother Mahmudul Hasan Noman said the government has provided police protection to their family for three years since the incident.

“Three police personnel have been giving us security round the clock... But we are [still] indirectly receiving threats from fake Facebook accounts. We request the government to keep the police protection until the case is completely disposed of.”

Contacted, Law Minister Anisul Huq on Friday said he will ask the attorney general’s office to take necessary steps to hold the hearing of the Nusrat murder case on a priority basis after Eid-ul-Fitr.

Deputy Attorney General Bashir Ahmed said a HC bench led by Justice Soumendra Sarker was ready to hold hearing in last week of March in 2020 but it could not as its functions were halted due to the pandemic.

The then chief justice Syed Mahmud Hossain had earlier assigned the HC bench led by Justice Soumendra Sarker (now retired) for the hearing and disposal, he said, adding that it is uncertain whether the current chief justice will assign another bench for this.

“It will take at least three months for the HC to start the hearing of the case.”

On April 6, 2019, Nusrat Jahan Rafi was set on fire by four people under the direction of the then principle of Sonagazi Islamia Fazil Madrasa Siraj ud Daula after she refused to withdraw a rape case filed by her mother against him. The case was filed after Siraj had sexually harassed Nusrat the month before.

After fighting for her life with 80 percent burns on her body, Nusrat died on April 10, 2019.

After PM Sheikh Hasina gave priority to Nusrat’s murder case, the lower court concerned had completed trial proceedings in record time.

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Haor recoils in horror

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“We tried hard to protect the dyke but we could not. This was my total produce for this year,” the elderly farmer said.

Like Aynal, hundreds of farmers of the haor areas cultivated Boro on 4.03 lakh hectares of land and they were eyeing good produce for favourable weather.

After the first blow incurred nominal loss considering the cultivated lands, farmers became hopeful as the rain stopped upstream and water started receding.

The FFWC forecast, however, hit them hard and now most of the farmers are passing their time on the dykes to protect their yield.

According to the FFWC bulletin yesterday, it will rain heavily in the north-eastern districts and in India’s Meghalaya and Assam provinces in the next 24 to 72 hours.

FFWC Executive Engineer Arifuzzaman Bhuiyan said, “Considering the rainfall, we are forecasting another flash flood by the end of this week.

“Given the water level in the rivers, moderate rainfall will cause huge damage in Sunamganj, Netrakona and Kishoreganj.”

Tara Miah, a farmer in Sunamganj’s Madhyanagar upazila, said, “Only a few days remaining for the paddy to ripen enough for cutting. If another flood hits, I will lose everything as the nearby levee is in a poor state and cannot take another blow.”

To protect the harvest, 520 kilometres of levees

were constructed and repaired in Sunamganj district alone spending Tk 120 crore.

However, two large levees – one at Chandra Shonar Thal in Dharmapasha upazila and another at Chapir Haor in Derai upazila – broke and thousands of hectares were inundated.

According to the BWDB, all levees are now at risk as they suffered the first blow and may not sustain another.

M o h a m m a d Shamsuddoha, executive engineer of Sunamganj BWDB, said, “We are focusing on protecting the standing levees and mobilising sandbags and other materials to the volunteering farmers to protect all damaged levees.”

After the 2017 flash flood that devastated the haor region, the government revised the “Kajer Binimoye Taka Rules -2017” and Project Implementation Committees (PIC) formed by the farmers are given authority to construct levees.

According to the policy, all PICs must be formed by November 30 of a year, the repair work is to start by December 15 and to be completed by February 28.

Kashmir Reza, president of Haor O Paribesh Unnayan Sangtha, said, “The levees are weaker than it should be because they delayed starting the work and hurried to finish them. As the compaction was not properly done, these levees are not holding up the floodwater.”

Meanwhile, Planning

Minister and Sunamganj-3 Parliamentarian MA Mannan yesterday visited haor and levees in Shantiganj and Jagannathpur upazilas.

During his visit, he spoke with the farmers who complained of corruption, negligence and anomalies centring the levee construction projects.

“No one shall be spared if negligence and corruption are found after investigating the matter. But our priority now is to sustain the remaining levees from another flash flood,” the minister said.

All concerned authorities should be watchful and the damaged farmers will be compensated.”

things like this happen in buses. He then asked me to sit in a seat at the back if I had any problem.”

After Monjila called the national helpline, members from Lohagara Police Station appeared at the scene and arrested Paran.

On February 8, 2021, police submitted a charge sheet in the case, mentioning that the accused “touched the woman inappropriately twice”.

The police officer who investigated the incident said in the charge sheet that he interviewed witnesses and found circumstantial evidence against the accused.

Contacted on Wednesday, Paran said it was a “sub-judice” matter, so he wouldn’t make any comments.

His lawyer, however, told

Imran Khan ousted

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minister’s supporters claim there is a foreign conspiracy to oust him.

Khan, 69, surged to power in 2018 with the military’s support, but recently lost his parliamentary majority when allies quit his coalition government.

Opposition parties say he has failed to revive an economy battered by Covid-19 or fulfil promises to make Pakistan a corruption-free, prosperous nation respected on the world stage.

The cricket star turned politician has vowed to “struggle” against any move to replace him.

Meanwhile, late in the night, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) was set to take up a petition asking the court to restrain Prime Minister Imran Khan from de-notifying General Bajwa as the chief of army staff.

The petition, a copy of which is available with Dawn, was filed by an advocate under Article 199 of the Constitution and mentioned the Federation of Pakistan, Government of Pakistan, Prime Minister Imran Khan, President Dr Arif Alvi, Ministry of Law and the secretary of the Ministry of Defence as respondents.

The petition is a pre-emptive measure to restrain the premier from “using his arbitrary power” to recommend the army chief’s approval before the expiry of his term for “personal and political motive”.

However, no such notification was issued by the PM office till filing this report, according to Dawn. Fawad Chaudhry, Khan’s

information minister, denied that the government had taken any step to remove the army chief, terming such reports “baseless”.

The opposition and some analysts say Khan has fallen out with the military, a charge he and the military deny. The army has ruled the state for half its 75-year post-colonial history, and no prime minister has completed a full five-year term.

Khan has accused the United States of supporting a plot to oust him, without offering evidence of his claim, which Washington has dismissed. He opposed the US-led intervention in Afghanistan and has developed relations with Russia since becoming prime minister.

then took the decision [of cancelling his appointment] following consultation with the Supreme Court.”

After the appointment was scrapped, Monjila shared a message on a Facebook Messenger group, which prompted Paran to file the DSA case against her.

According to the case statement, filed on December 7 last year, the message, translated verbatim, goes, “How can a sexual harasser ensure women are getting justice?”

Attached with the message was a post from a Facebook page with details of the sexual harassment case.

Paran on Wednesday told The Daily Star: “Whoever will share the post will be made an accused.”

In the DSA case, Monjila

was accused of defaming Paran and disrespecting the fairness in recruitment in the country’s judiciary.

Monjila, also a lawyer, had sought anticipatory bail in the case, and was granted bail once for a month. But when she went to a Dhaka court to surrender on March 10, a magistrate ordered her jail sentence. She was bailed out six days later.

Monjila now faces a new challenge – either she has to settle the sexual harassment case or face the risk of jail time again.

A copy of a court order says Monjila was released on bail under the condition that she will withdraw her case. In return, the DSA case too will be withdrawn.

“When I appeared for my hearing on April 3, 2022, I found that the other

France prepares for first round of tight Macron re-election bid

AFP, Paris

France yesterday prepared for the first round of presidential elections projected to produce a run-off rematch between President Emmanuel Macron and far-right leader Marine Le Pen that will be far tighter than their duel five years ago.

All further political activity by candidates was banned on the final day before polls open in mainland France at 0600 GMT on Sunday, after a campaign overshadowed by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

French overseas territories will begin voting earlier to take account of the time difference, starting with Saint Pierre and Miquelon off the coast of Canada at 1000 GMT.

Territories in the Caribbean, the Pacific and finally the Indian Ocean will follow before polling stations open in mainland France.

Polls predict that Macron will lead Le Pen by a handful of percentage points in round one, with the top two going through to a second round on April 24.

party filed an application seeking cancellation of my bail if I don’t go for settlement. Following this, the magistrate gave us 30 minutes to settle the matter through arbitration,” she wrote in a letter to the chief justice.

After she turned down the offer and was called into the magistrate’s chamber two hours later, she wrote, “There, the magistrate again asked me to settle the issue through arbitration.”

Paran said, “She was released on condition that she will settle this. So, this must be done.”

While talking to this correspondent before a hearing recently, Monjila said, “I am mentally prepared to go to jail again”.