

Stay alert to ward off sanctions

Foreign ministry asks missions abroad

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The foreign ministry has asked Bangladesh missions abroad to remain highly alert and vigilant and take preemptive measures when necessary to block any attempts of sanctions against government agencies and individuals.

In a letter on December 31, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen mentioned the sanctions imposed against Rab and seven of its current and former officials last year by the US that cited gross human rights violations by the force.

“There is every reason to believe that similar moves may be instigated against government agencies and individuals under one pretext or another.”

Masud said while being in close contact with host governments is the cardinal feature of day-to-day activities of any diplomatic mission, the current global and domestic political scenarios demand more.

The foreign ministry officials said this is an annual letter from the foreign ministry to the Bangladesh missions abroad. However, this year the instructions are more significant than others because of the crucial year of national elections.

The US, Japan and other foreign embassies, especially the western countries, have already made statements about the fair and participatory elections and upholding human rights, and ensuring freedom of the press.

The relations between Bangladesh and the US have become strained following the sanctions and US statements on elections, human rights and democracy.

Alleging irregularities in the last two parliamentary elections, some foreign diplomats here said they would be keeping a close watch on the next polls.

Apart from domestic issues, global economic and political scenario has also changed following the Covid-19 pandemic and Ukraine-Russia war.

“I’m afraid; challenges may intensify in the days to come as peaceful settlement of the ongoing conflict [Ukraine-Russia war] seems a far cry ... I assume, the year 2023 is going to take a litmus test of our diplomatic acumen and the capacity to navigate towards serving our national interest in an ever more challenging global atmosphere.”

Foreign Secretary Masud said there are increasing concerns that certain vested quarters are using social media to spread lies and misinformation, which will continue throughout the year.

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Elderly local residents walk past a destroyed residential building in Chasiv Yar, Eastern Ukraine, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

China marks end of ‘zero-Covid’

Reopens borders, ends quarantine for overseas travellers

REUTERS, Hong Kong/Beijing

Travellers streamed into China by air, land and sea yesterday, many eager for long-awaited reunions, as Beijing opened borders that have been all but shut since the start of the Covid pandemic.

After three years, mainland China opened sea and land crossings with Hong Kong and ended a requirement for incoming travellers to quarantine, dismantling a final pillar of a zero-Covid policy that had shielded China’s 1.4 billion people from the virus but also cut them off from the rest of the world.

China’s easing over the past month of one of the world’s tightest Covid regimes followed historic protests against a policy that included frequent testing, curbs on movement and mass lockdowns that heavily damaged the second-biggest economy.

Long queues formed at the Hong Kong international airport’s check-in counters for flights to mainland cities including Beijing, Tianjin and Xiamen. Hong Kong media outlets estimated that thousands were crossing.

“I’m so happy, so happy, so excited. I haven’t seen my parents for many years,”

said Hong Kong resident Teresa Chow as she and dozens of other travellers prepared to cross into mainland China from Hong Kong’s Lok Ma Chau checkpoint.

Investors hope the reopening will reinvigorate a \$17 trillion economy suffering its slowest growth in nearly half a century. But the abrupt policy reversal has triggered a massive wave of infections that is overwhelming some hospitals and causing business disruptions.

The border opening follows Saturday’s start of “chun yun”, the 40-day period of Lunar New Year travel, which before the pandemic was the world’s largest annual migration, as people returned to their hometowns or took holidays with family.

Some 2 billion trips are expected this season, nearly double last year’s movement and recovering to 70 percent of 2019 levels, the government said.

Many Chinese are also expected to start travelling abroad, a long-awaited shift for tourist spots in countries such as Thailand and Indonesia. But several governments - worried about China’s Covid spike - are imposing curbs on travellers from the country.

China yesterday resumed issuing

passports and travel visas for mainland residents, and ordinary visas and residence permits for foreigners. Beijing has quotas on the number of people who can travel between Hong Kong and China each day.

At the Beijing Capital International Airport, families and friends exchanged emotional hugs and greetings with passengers arriving from places such as Hong Kong, Warsaw and Frankfurt, meetings impossible just a day earlier.

“I’ve been looking forward to the reopening for a long time. Finally we are reconnected with the world. I’m thrilled, I can’t believe it’s happening,” said a businesswoman surnamed Shen, 55, who flew in from Hong Kong.

China downgraded its Covid management to Category B from A, which had allowed local authorities to quarantine patients and their close contacts and lock down regions.

But concerns remain that the great migration of city workers to their hometowns and reopening of borders may cause a surge in infections in smaller towns and rural areas that are less-equipped with intensive-care beds and ventilators.

Father, son killed in explosion in Kaptai

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangamati

A man and his son were killed and his wife was injured in an explosion in Rangamati’s Kaptai upazila yesterday.

The incident took place at a house in Badsha Majhi Tila area, adjacent to the new market in Kaptai union around 6:30pm.

Police could not immediately identify the cause of the explosion.

Jasim Uddin, officer-in-charge of Kaptai Police Station, said an explosive disposal team from the army was at the scene.

Ismail Mia, 45, and his son Md Rifat, 7, were brought dead to Kaptai Upazila Health Complex while injured Sakhina Begum, 35, was sent to Chattogram Medical College Hospital, said Omar Faruq Rony, the hospital’s resident medical officer.

Additional Superintendent of Police (Sadar circle) Rawshan Ara Rob said the victim found some metal objects in a nearby bush and took them home. Police primarily believe those objects exploded, she said.

15 illegal resorts asked to stop construction on St Martin’s Island

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox’s Bazar

The local administration yesterday asked 15 illegal resorts to stop their construction work during a drive on St Martin’s Island.

It was jointly conducted by Cox’s Bazar district administration and Department of Environment at zones that are declared as Environmentally Critical Areas.

“We have also collected data on the builders of illegal structures,” said Erfanul Haque Chowdhury, assistant commissioner (land) and executive magistrate of Teknaf upazila.

More such operations will be conducted in the following weeks, he added.

No more illegal construction will be allowed on the island and those who are involved in it will be brought to book, said Mohammad Hafizur Rahman, deputy director of Cox’s Bazar DoE.

Another Rohingya leader killed in span of 8 hrs

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox’s Bazar

A Rohingya community leader was shot dead at a refugee camp in Ukhiya, Cox’s Bazar, around 4:00am yesterday, less than eight hours after another community leader was killed there.

Mohammad Selim, 35, was shot dead by masked assailants at Block-B of the Rohingya Camp-8 East in Palang Khali Union, said Sheikh Mohammad Ali, officer-in-charge of Ukhiya Police Station.

Selim’s wife filed a case accusing 33 people over the killing, added the officer.

On Saturday night, Rohingya community leader Rashid, 35, was stabbed to death in Jamtoli Camp-15.

Power tariff may rise by 15pc

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would be increased by 6 percent. But it is uncertain if the fuel needed for that increased production can be obtained. This would leave the power companies with extra money, he said.

“The government had given a subsidy of Tk 12,700 crore to import LNG and also increased consumer prices by 23 percent to cover the costs. Last year, that much LNG could not be imported. How much did the revenue demand decrease last year as a result?” he questioned.

Revised draft

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In July 2020, Supreme Court lawyer Tanvir Ahmed filed a writ petition as a public interest litigation saying several OTT platforms contained questionable and obscene content from Bangladesh and India that can cause moral degradation of the young people. The BTRC later submitted to the court a draft on the Regulation for Digital and Social Media Platforms, 2021.

WHAT IS IN THE NEW DRAFT

The latest draft raised the amount of earnest (security deposit) money from Tk 5 lakh to Tk 15 lakh for Bangladeshi platforms, and from Tk 25 lakh to Tk 45 lakh for foreign ones.

Besides, foreign platforms must have an office here and 50 percent of their total content must be “local”.

The five-year registration fee for local platforms has been raised from Tk 5 lakh to Tk 10 lakh and for foreign platforms from Tk 20 lakh to Tk 35 lakh.

Each content has to be rated for its suitability for certain audiences and there must be a parental lock to prevent children from watching content rated for above 18-year-olds.

According to the draft, OTT is a type of media service that broadcasts entertainment programmes, drama, movie, documentary, sports, infotainment, advertisement, and video-on-demand through the internet or equivalent technology in Bangladesh.

The earlier draft barred the platforms from showing TV news and talk-shows. But the new draft dropped the restriction.

Anwar-ul Alam Chowdhury, president of Bangladesh Chamber of Industries, said a 15 percent hike in electricity tariff will only exacerbate inflation and increase sufferings of the people of low-income group.

“If they [PDB] do not want to increase sufferings, they should rather reduce prices by increasing their efficiency. Profit does not come by hiking prices, rather by improving efficiency. We have reasonable doubt about their competitiveness,” he said.

“It is high time to enhance

efficiency,” he said, citing global economic slowdown and fears of recession in Europe. When sustaining exports is a challenge, power price hike will increase production cost, he added.

The BCI president demanded reduction of waste and slashing Value Added Tax, and other taxes to keep the tariffs at tolerable level.

Faruque Hassan, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers & Exporters Association (BGMEA), also said production cost would

Washington to carry on working with Dhaka

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enduring partnership with Dhaka and termed Bangladesh’s economic growth over the past 50 years as a “remarkable story”.

“As 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of US-Bangladesh relations, I would like to acknowledge our enduring partnership with Bangladesh,” Biden mentioned in his written remarks, according to a statement of the Bangladesh Embassy in Washington DC yesterday.

While formally presenting the credentials to the US president, Ambassador Imran conveyed the greetings of President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Biden in his letter to the ambassador said, “My administration looks forward to working with you to deepen our relations as we address the opportunities and challenges ahead. It is a pleasure to welcome you

to Washington.”

Biden also assured the Bangladesh ambassador of extending all sorts of cooperation during his tenure in the US.

Bangladesh has emerged as an important partner on international trade and investment, climate change, humanitarian, refugee, UN Peacekeeping, and counterterrorism, maritime and other security issues, he continued.

He said Bangladesh has expanded its largely agrarian-based economy to a regional economic power poised to become a major participant in global supply chains.

Appreciating Bangladesh’s generosity in hosting nearly one million Rohingyas, the US president said they would continue to support Bangladesh in assisting these refugees and their host communities, and protecting their rights.

Protest-hit Iran sentences four to jail over strike call

AFP, Tehran

Iran’s judiciary yesterday announced jail terms of up to 10 years for people who called for strikes as part of a months-long protest movement.

It is the first time the judiciary has announced prison sentences for such incitement during the nationwide protests triggered by the September death in custody of Mahsa Amini.

The judiciary’s Mizan Online news website said the four defendants received between one and 10 years in prison. They were not identified and may still appeal the verdicts.

Activists on social media had called for three-day nationwide strikes starting on December 5, in support of the movement which began with the death of Amini, 22. She had been arrested by morality police for allegedly violating the strict dress code for women.

Mojtaba Ghahramani, head of the judiciary for Iran’s southern province of Hormozgan, said the four were sentenced principally “for having incited drivers to strike”, and for vandalism. He was quoted by Mizan.

According to Ghahramani, “none of the defendants is a driver or has anything

to do with the transport sector.”

“One of the defendants was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment and another to five years for forming a group with the aim of disrupting national security,” Ghahramani said.

Two others have been given a year in jail each and a fine for “disturbing public order and destroying truck windows”, he said.

On December 5 local media reported that authorities sealed a jewellery shop and restaurant in Tehran belonging to football legend Ali Daei, after he backed the protesters’ strike calls.

Bushra gets bail, finally

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On Thursday, the judge set January 8 (yesterday) to pass an order after the hearing in the murder case.

Obaidur Rahman, senior superintendent of Kashimpur Women’s Central Jail, said they will take steps for Bushra’s release after getting the court order.

Family members of Bushra, a private university student, are worried about her education and future and claimed she has been suffering in jail for two months without having committed any crime.

“She is innocent ... We are now waiting for her release,” her uncle Mazharul Islam said soon after the court finally granted her bail.

“But who will compensate her for the trauma of being in jail without committing any crime? We don’t even know if she will be able to move past it. “Her father has been devastated ...”

On November 10, Rampura police

arrested Bushra, a friend of Fardin, from her Banasree house soon after a murder case was filed against her.

She was sent to jail on November 16 after her bail petition was rejected following the completion of her five-day remand.

On December 5, she sought bail before a Dhaka court, which set January 5 for a hearing on the petition.

Fardin, a third-year student of the civil engineering at Buet, was found dead in the Shitalakkhya in Narayanganj on November 7, three days after he went missing.

After over a month of investigation, the Detective Branch of police and Rab on December 11 said Fardin died by suicide after jumping off a bridge into the river.

A day later, DB Chief Mohammad Harun Or Rashid said they did not find Bushra’s involvement in the incident.

No legal bar

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of within 30 days the rule that, on January 3, ordered the state to explain why Fakhru and Abbas should not be granted regular bail in the case.

A four-member bench of the Appellate Division, headed by Chief Justice Hasan Foez Siddique, passed the order following a petition filed by the state seeking a stay on the HC’s bail order.

The other judges of the bench are Justice M Enayetur Rahim, Justice Md Ashfaqul Islam, and Justice Jahangir Hossain Selim.

The grounds on which the SC passed the order could not be known, as its full text was not released yesterday.

Following the Appellate Division order, there is no legal bar for Fakhru and Abbas to get released from jail, their principal counsel Zainul Abedin told The Daily Star.

He said they will furnish bail bonds for their clients immediately after receiving the order.

“We hope to receive the copy of the Supreme Court order tomorrow [Monday] morning and then we will furnish bail bonds. Mirza Fakhru

Islam Alamgir and Mirza Abbas will then be released from jail.”

A section of pro-BNP lawyers accompanied Zainul during the hearing of the petition.

Meanwhile, Attorney General AM Amin Uddin, who appeared for the state during hearing, told reporters at his office that the Appellate Division has upheld the HC’s bail order, proving that the courts are fully independent and they function in accordance with law.

Both Fakhru and Abbas have earlier been denied bail four times by the lower courts concerned.

The case was filed with Paltan Model Police Station on December 8, a day after a clash broke out in front of the BNP’s Nayapaltan office, leaving one dead and many injured.

Both of them were picked up from their homes around 3:00am on December 9, a day before the party’s mass rally in Dhaka. They were sent to jail after Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Mohammad Jashim rejected their bail petitions.

The two were shown arrested on charges of provoking party activists to attack police.