

Myanmar junta at war with its own people: UN

AFP, Geneva

Myanmar's military rulers now see civilians as their adversaries and are making war on the country's own people, harming even the basic ability to live, the United Nations said yesterday.

Two years on from the February 1, 2021 coup that toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government, the situation is a "festering catastrophe", said UN human rights chief Volker Turk, adding that the military was operating with "complete impunity".

In a report examining the first two years since the takeover, the UN Human Rights Office said that at least 2,940 people had been verified as killed, of which nearly 30 percent died in detention. However, the true death toll is likely to be much higher.

James Rodehaver, head of the UN rights office's Myanmar team, said the armed forces were now actively fighting on around 13 different fronts.

"The military is stretched increasingly thin," he told a briefing in Geneva, so have relied increasingly on air power and artillery to clear the way for ground forces, with more than 300 airstrikes in the last year. Nearly 80 percent of 330 townships have been impacted by armed clashes.

DELAYED LOCAL POLLS Sri Lanka SC orders govt to go ahead

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's top court yesterday ordered the government to proceed with a delayed local election, overruling President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who said the country was too broke to pay for it.

The Supreme Court ordered treasury to grant funds for the polls which were originally planned for March 9, but put off indefinitely last week when the government refused to finance them.

Wickremesinghe had said the island nation needed its limited coffers for other priorities such as paying salaries.

The court issued a restraining order preventing the treasury chief and Wickremesinghe in his capacity as finance minister from "withholding funds allocated in the 2023 budget for the purpose of conducting the polls".

Tigers' home

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Curran ended up picking four for 29 in 6.4 overs while Rashid also finished with a four-fer, having conceded 45 in 10 overs.

Earlier, Bangladesh perhaps missed the trick after Tamim won the toss and asked England to bat on a pitch that played a lot better in favour of the English batters.

Roy smashed his 12th ODI hundred and provided the platform for a big total. He alongside skipper Jos Buttler added 109 runs for the fourth wicket to help England in laying the platform for a big total.

Roy was eventually dismissed on 132 off 124 balls, featuring 18 fours and a six, while Buttler quick-fired his way to 76 off 64. Afterwards, cameos from Moeen, who scored 42 off 35 deliveries, and Curran, who stayed unbeaten on 33 off just 19 deliveries, ensured England added 57 runs in the last five overs of the innings.

On the bowling front for Bangladesh, pacer Taskin Ahmed picked up three while Mehedi Hasan Miraz bagged two wickets.

Left-arm seamer Sam Curran, upon his return to the England side, removed Liton Das and Najmul Hossain Shanto for golden ducks in the very first over of the innings. He went on to dismiss Mushfiquur Rahim in his next over, leaving the hosts struggling on nine for three inside the first three overs of the innings.

Shakib Al Hasan and Tamim attempted to stage a rescue act, adding 79 runs for the fourth wicket, and once the Bangladesh skipper was dismissed after scoring 35 off 65 deliveries at the bowling off Moeen Ali, the game began slipping away from Bangladesh's grasp.

It was then Adil Rashid who made sure the game was all but gone for the hosts as he removed half-centuryur Shakib before making Mahmudullah (32) his second victim. From then on, Bangladesh were never able to pose any form of threat.



Israeli security forces block Palestinian and Israeli peace activists protesting at the entrance of Huwara in the occupied West Bank, yesterday, following deadly violence by Israeli settlers. Israeli forces shot dead a 15-year-old Palestinian in West Bank late on Thursday, Palestinian officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

MILITARISATION IN ASIAN SEAS Quad powers concerned

AFP, New Delhi

The United States, Japan, India and Australia yesterday expressed concern over the militarisation of Asia's waters, in a veiled reference to China's growing presence in contested seas.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the foreign ministers of the other three nations assembled in New Delhi under the auspices of their Quad grouping.

In a joint statement issued by host India, the Quad called for "the importance of adherence to international law" in the East and South China Seas "to meet challenges to the maritime rules-based order".

"We strongly oppose any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo or increase tensions in the area," it said.

"We express serious concern at the militarisation of disputed features, the dangerous use of coast guard vessels and maritime militia and efforts to disrupt other countries' offshore resource exploitation activities," it added.

China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, through which trillions of dollars in trade passes annually.

It has ignored an international court ruling that its claims have no legal basis and built bases in the waters, alarming Washington and other Asian countries with territorial claims over its waters.

Cambodia opposition leader jailed for 27 years

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodian opposition leader Kem Sokha was sentenced to 27 years in jail for treason yesterday, a verdict that ruled him out of elections this year and was denounced by the US as a "miscarriage of justice".

Kem Sokha was accused of hatching a "secret plan" in collusion with foreign entities to topple the government of PM Hun Sen, upon his arrest in 2017.

Dhaka, Delhi

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diplomatic mission in Dhaka soon.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh State Minister Md Shahriar Alam met Rajkumar Ranjan Singh, India's minister of state for external affairs, and both reiterated the importance of enhanced exchanges and cooperation on bilateral issues of mutual interest.

Shahriar Alam conveyed that the government of Bangladesh wishes to strengthen cooperation with the Northeastern states of India.

The state minister of Bangladesh is currently visiting New Delhi to attend the Raisina Dialogue 2023, India's flagship conference on geopolitics and geoeconomics, jointly hosted by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and private think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

Asked about the issue, Quader said the ruling AL lawmakers raise a hue and cry and create obstacles if he speaks against the government.

"That's why I speak on different public interest issues at the beginning of my speeches in parliament," he added.

After the last national election, the JP decided to join the AL government.

The party, which is well-known for flip-flopping, later decided to serve as the main opposition in parliament with 26 MPs.

The JP became the main opposition in the 10th parliament, formed after the 2014 national election, which was boycotted by the BNP-led 20-party alliance. Three JP lawmakers were also made ministers.

JP timid inside

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Of late, the JP has also been suffering from a leadership crisis which has visibly weakened its organisational standing, said Iftekharuzzaman.

The apparent anti-government rhetoric by JP leaders outside parliament may be intended to salvage the party's public image from further damage, he added.

On the other hand, the party's contrasting narratives in parliament may be aimed at keeping the option open in case the role of a "loyal opposition" becomes available again, observed the TIB executive director.

Parliamentary affairs expert Prof Nizam Uddin Ahmed said the JP is actually a "part of the AL-led grand alliance".

"They talked against the government on streets so that people consider them an opposition party. But they are afraid of the government and that's why they are not vocal about the allegations of widespread corruption against the government."

"Moreover, the election equation is still not clear.

It stands by those who have made thousands of crores of taka through looting," he alleged.

The JP chief said "politics of looting" has started in the country and those who looted money from banks are being made ministers by the government.

On October 23 last year, the JP chief at a discussion in the capital said Bangladesh is "champion in mismanagement" as there is no democracy in the country. He said the country is seeing an "autocratic rule in the name of democracy".

Contacted, Transparency International Bangladesh Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said the role of JP has always reflected inconsistency since the formation of the 10th parliament.

He said the JP was unsure of whether it was an opposition party or part of the ruling coalition. "Their leaders have admitted many times that theirs was neither a ruling nor an opposition party."

Biman blamed

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The cost of pilgrimage under the government management reached Tk 6.83 lakh, according to an announcement of the religious affairs ministry.

Leaders of HAAB and Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh (ATAB) said one of the main reasons for the rise in the cost is the fare of Biman Bangladesh Airlines.

Biman has increased the fare by 30 percent to make extra profit. As a result, the cost of packages under both the government and the private hajj management have increased by about Tk 1.61 lakh, they added.

Aviation expert Kazi Wahidul Alam, also editor of The Bangladesh Monitor, said Biman increases airfare for hajj pilgrims every year to cover its losses and to show that the airliner is a profitable entity.

Biman Managing Director and CEO Shafiu Azim was not available for

comment on this issue.

However, a top Biman official, wishing anonymity, said their flights have to return to Dhaka from Saudi Arabia mostly empty, and as such they demand extra fare. Besides, he also mentioned the high price of jet fuel.

According to the information provided by the ATAB, Biman has increased airfare by almost 70 percent in the last six years.

In 2017, the fare was Tk 1.18 lakh, in 2018 it was Tk 1.28 lakh, in 2019 Tk 1.28 lakh, in 2020 Tk 1.38 lakh and in 2022 it was 1.4 lakh.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was no hajj pilgrimage from Bangladesh in 2020 and 2021, but the airfare was announced by Biman for the first of those two years.

ATAB and HAAB leaders said in a bid to get rid of the monopoly business from the flag carriers of Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, the government should allow other airlines from India, Pakistan,

Malaysia and Indonesia to carry hajj pilgrims.

This year, 1.27 lakh Bangladeshis will be able to perform Hajj. Of the total, Biman is supposed to carry fifty percent and two flag carriers of Saudi Arabia – Saudia and Flynas – are supposed to carry the rest.

"We want an end to Biman's monopoly during hajj. That's why the government should allow all airlines operating on the Middle East route to carry hajj pilgrims," said HAAB President Shahdat Hossain Taslim.

Abdus Salam Aref, general secretary of ATAB, also said, "Biman wants to do its whole year's business only during the hajj season and that's why the airline is charging very high fare."

Of the total 1.27 lakh, only around 35,000 pilgrims have completed registration as of yesterday. HAAB and ATAB leaders believe the high cost of hajj package is to blame for the low number.

Scrap power deal

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Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) must send a power demand note to Adani every four months and if, due to changed circumstances, BPDB buys less power, Bangladesh will have to pay for the full amount mentioned in the demand note.

Furthermore, Bangladesh is required to purchase one-third of the total production capacity of the Adani plant, otherwise, Bangladesh must pay a fine.

In addition, Bangladesh must pay a capacity charge if the Adani power plant is forced to delay commercial production due to PDB's reduced demand.

Overall, the project imposes numerous obligations and risks on Bangladesh, the statement reads.

The green organisations said the government's present power development plan is not only coal-based but also foreign-dependent.

Under the plan, the percentage of imported electricity in the country's power distribution channel will increase to 15 percent in 2050 from five percent in 2021.

It is to be noted that excluding Afghanistan, at present Bangladesh imports the highest amount of electricity in South Asia.

The organisations said last year at a conference in Dhaka, they had demanded the government to formulate and execute a new power development plan, reducing dependency on coal-based power production, scraping import of electricity, and increasing the use of renewable energy.

They added that the re-analysis of the Adani deal proved the legitimacy of their demands, urging the government to reconsider those.

Ctg, CHT major hubs

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trade in Bangladesh and the factors driving it.

Researchers recorded a total of 928 incidents of wildlife trading. Birds were traded the most followed by mammals and reptiles.

"Mammals are trafficked to Myanmar and India. There is a huge demand for their body parts in international market, especially in Asia," Nasir Uddin, lead researcher of the study, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The researchers identified 421 traders selling wildlife and interviewed 337 of them.

The study said birds were traded mainly as pets.

The mammals, on the other hand, were generally traded for meat, pelts, and body parts, which are often believed to have medicinal values. Some smaller mammal species, which could be carried and concealed easily, were traded alive, it added.

The study found trading of body parts of carnivore animals and deer in peri-urban markets near the Sundarbans.

Traders acknowledged the availability of body parts of high value species such as tigers, crocodiles, fishing cats and clouded leopards in some of those markets.

Trading of bushmeat, especially that of deer, was widespread, according to the study.

At least 20 wildlife traders said they don't keep high value species in shops or houses as they are difficult to conceal from law enforcers. Body parts of these animals or byproducts like oil are safer for trading, they added.

The researchers also found evidence of trading of endangered species, not endemic to the area, suggesting illegal trade from other countries.

"The availability of high-value wildlife in surrounding forests, the demand for bushmeat, the motivation of local poachers and traders, and the inefficiency of law enforcement agencies in and around peri-urban markets are driving the trade," the study said.

The study blamed law enforcers' inaction for the rampant illegal trading of birds. The law enforcers' perception of birds as low-value species is also helping the trade, it added.

Nasir Uddin said the government strengthen monitoring at the hill tracts and Sundarban areas and take specific measures to reduce the illegal trade.

Asked Md Sanaullah Patwary, director of the Wildlife Crime Control Unit of the Department of Forest, acknowledged the illegal trading, but claimed the situation was improving.

"It is not possible to stop wildlife trading completely. From 2012 to 2023, more than 49,000 animals were rescued. We are trying to improve the situation," he said.

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