

REPATRIATION PLAN Dhaka conveys concerns of Rohingyas to Myanmar

STAR REPORT

Bangladesh has conveyed to Myanmar the concerns the Rohingyas have over their repatriation plan to the Rakhine State, said Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Shehli Sabrin.

"Myanmar authorities have been communicated over the concerns of Rohingyas regarding the repatriation plan," she told journalists at a media briefing at the foreign ministry yesterday.

After the first-ever "go and see" visit to Maungdaw of Rakhine by a team of 20 Rohingyas on May 5, some of them told the media that they have doubts about Myanmar authorities' intentions.

They said they were unclear about how they will be granted citizenship. They have also doubts about getting back their properties, which they left in Rakhine facing a military campaign in 2017.

"We don't want to live in a camp in our country," said a Rohingya man after returning from the Rakhine visit.

He said Rohingyas would have to fill up a national verification card (NVC) if they return. Rejecting the NVCs, Rohingyas say this requirement amounts to declaring them as foreigners. Instead, they have asked for a guarantee of citizenship.

A foreign ministry official said the concerns of Rohingyas were communicated to the Myanmar embassy in Dhaka ahead of a planned visit by a Myanmar delegation.

The delegation is scheduled to visit and talk to the Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar camps, where nearly a million of them live.

"The delegation was supposed to visit Bangladesh shortly after the Rohingya's visit, but it got delayed because of cyclone Mocha," he said.

Shehli Sabrin said the visit may take place in May or June.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch yesterday criticised the Rohingya repatriation plan, saying it poses "grave risks" to their lives and liberty.

The two countries are looking to return around 1,100 people in a pilot project in the coming weeks.

"Bangladesh authorities shouldn't forget the reasons why Rohingya(s) became refugees in the first place, and recognise that none of those factors have changed," HRW said.

"Bangladesh is frustrated with its burden as host, but sending refugees back to the control of a ruthless Myanmar junta will just be setting the stage for the next devastating exodus," the group said in a statement.

Mizanur Rahman, Bangladesh's refugee commissioner, rejected any claims of coercing the Rohingyas to return or not consulting them.

"The repatriation is voluntary," Rahman told AFP.

SHOJON offering affordable psychological counselling



PHOTO: COURTESY



RBR

In this city of ours, mental illness is on the rise. Due to social taboos and a lack of knowledge regarding proper medical care facilities, most sufferers do not avail treatment. For many, seeking medical help is not even an option, as the costs of seeking psychological counselling and medication are high. It is exactly here where SHOJON, an initiative of SAJIDA Mental Health Program comes in. They offer professional emotional help to the poor for Tk 200 per session.

"SHOJON is a tele-mental health helpline, where people can call and receive counselling from our mental health professionals. We even have discounts for people who cannot afford Tk 200 and at times we give them free service after evaluating their financial conditions," says Mukit Akram, programme manager, SAJIDA Mental Health Program.

Israt Jahan, senior clinical psycho-social counsellor of SHOJON, adds, "We provide mental health care regardless of race, class, or sexual orientation. We have two tele mental health services, one is SHOJON and the other one is KAAAN PETE ROI, an emotional support and suicide helpline that provides a safe space for individuals in need of an immediate emotional outlet.

"KAAAN PETE ROI is a service dealing only with suicide and instant support. We have no counselling for these hapless people. It is from this

need that we founded SHOJON in 2021 and started to provide counselling."

The fee of Tk 200 is for sessions lasting between 40 to 45 minutes with no call charge, as the call goes from SHOJON to the people in distress.

SHOJON works in three tiers, the first one is where the para-counsellor does the initial assessment and counsel, and tier two is where the para-counsellor sends the client for sessions with psychologists if they feel the need for it. The third tier is for clients who need medical help and arrange for sessions with the psychiatrist maintaining overall client confidentiality.

"Since 2021 we have given primary mental health support to 3,545 callers in tier one, helped 537 clients in tier two, and 65 got psychological session and psychiatric service in tier three," Akram said.

To raise awareness among clients, SHOJON has partnership programmes with development-based national and international organisations that address issues of the urban poor. They want to ensure that this community can also avail of mental health services.

"My observation is that there is still a stigma in the community, the barrier

comes from the family, husband, or parents. They feel counselling is not needed; sadness of the mind will become normal with time. It is time we understand the need for help and not feel afraid. Most of our clients are students, job holders, and from extreme poverty. Once they avail of our outreach program, they said they are feeling better after talking and sharing their woes," Israt Jahan says.

SHOJON has an internationally certified six-month diploma programme in community mental health care. The internship programme for fresh graduates in psychology from Dhaka University and other institutes gives training and real-life practise session with an authentic six-month diploma in community mental health care and a six-month training programme.

SHOJON recruits trainees to build a resource of quality-ensured para counsellors with enough knowledge about community setting.

Thus, emotionally vulnerable people from any background can now access mental health services by calling 09612119900 anytime from 8:00am to 8:00pm and receive counselling from mental health professionals.



POST-COUP MYANMAR Military imported arms worth \$1b

UN expert says junta used them 'to commit atrocities'

AFP, United Nations

Myanmar's military has imported \$1 billion in weapons since seizing power in a 2021 coup and used them "to commit atrocities," a United Nations expert said in a report released Wednesday.

Fighting has ravaged Myanmar since the coup, including renewed clashes with ethnic rebel groups as well as the formation of dozens of "People's Defence Forces" now battling the junta.

In its crackdown against dissent, the "military has killed a minimum of 3,500 civilians" and the number of political prisoners has swelled to 20,000, said the report.

It added that at least \$1 billion "worth of weapons, dual-use technology, and materials used to manufacture weapons" were brought in by the junta from the day of the coup on February 1, 2021, to December 2022, primarily from suppliers in Russia, China, Singapore, and India.

"These weapons, and the materials to manufacture more of them, have continued to flow uninterrupted to the Myanmar military despite overwhelming evidence of its responsibility for atrocity crimes," said Tom Andrews, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar.

According to the report, the junta imported \$406 million in arms and equipment from Russia and \$267 million from China, including from state owned entities. Indian companies and state-owned entities accounted for \$51 million in goods.

Companies based in Singapore provided an additional \$254 million in supplies, while \$28 million in equipment came from entities based in Thailand.

AL only has election on its mind

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manifesto, and conducting surveys to find the candidates fit for nomination."

The AL is assuming that all political parties will participate in the election, he said when asked about the uncertainty over BNP's participation.

"But our final election strategy will depend on the situation."

The AL is also eyeing more votes by bringing like-minded political parties under its fold. It started talks with the partners of its "14-party ideological alliance" to bridge gaps that have developed over time, insiders say.

The AL has already conducted several surveys to identify possible nominees. Some more surveys will be done to select three suitable candidates from each constituency. One individual will eventually be

chosen.

In order to ensure discipline, the central AL leadership summoned leaders from 27 district units. Nine of them failed to hold councils after the tenure of the previous committee ended.

Leaders from 18 districts, where councils were held but no announcement of full committees was made within 45 days, were asked to meet central leaders with names of members for the proposed fully-fledged committees.

The AL asked its MPs and nomination aspirants to visit their constituencies to maintain close contact with the voters. They were also asked to work together with grassroots leaders and join the campaign trail of the person who gets nominated by the party, even if that means making sacrifices.

A central committee member

of the AL, requesting anonymity, said the ruling party was least bothered about BNP's plans for anti-government demonstrations because the people would reject the party for its anti-state stance. "We are on our way to participate in the election. We are preparing for it."

Other AL insiders said the AL manifesto for the 12th national election will highlight the pledge for a "Smart Bangladesh" by 2041.

According to party insiders, one of the main themes of AL's election campaign will be the achievements of the AL-led governments since 2009.

The AL campaigners will compare the BNP-led four-party government with the current one and talk about the situation that prevailed after the assassination of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975.

Take steps to stop forex reserve slide

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"India has contained its inflation efficiently, but we have failed to do so."

Inflation fell slightly to 9.24 percent in April after the Consumer Price Index jumped to a seven-month high of 9.33 percent in March. It was 6.29 percent in April last year.

According to Mansur, there is no scope to bring down imports from the current level as such a move will put an adverse impact on the economy.

"So, the central bank should reduce the deficit in the financial account to strengthen the reserves."

The financial account is a component of a country's balance of payments that covers claims or liabilities to non-residents concerning financial assets.

Between July and March, the financial account registered a deficit of \$2.21 billion in contrast to a surplus of \$11.92 billion a year ago, data from the BB showed. Historically, it has

always been in surplus.

Mansur said the central bank planned to set interest rates on loans based on the average rates of Treasury bills, but the yields of the securities are largely controlled by the BB.

"That is why the interest rates on loans will not be determined by the market."

Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, called for curbing the hundi cartel, an illegal cross-border financial transaction system, to prop up the reserves.

"It is difficult to stop hundi as the cartel usually provides a higher exchange rate for the dollar than banks to the recipients of remittances. So, ensuring corporate governance in the financial sector is important to contain hundi."

Monzur Hossain, research director of the BIDS, said currently, there were three to four exchange rates.

"But this is not good for the

market. A uniform exchange rate is an ideal instrument to ensure stability in the foreign exchange market."

Abdur Rouf Talukder, governor of the Bangladesh Bank, said a central bank could not tackle inflation alone.

"A coordinated fiscal and monetary policy is required to contain inflationary pressures."

Mashiur Rahman, the economic affairs adviser to the prime minister, said that private investment has been stuck at a certain level for the last several years.

"If private investment does not go up, the government will not be able to increase revenue generation."

Shamsul Alam, state minister for planning, said the supply chain management of goods should be better to combat higher inflation.

Binayak Sen, director-general of the BIDS, moderated the closing ceremony.

Police official gives deposition in murder case against Arav

COURT CORRESPONDENT

One more prosecution witness yesterday gave a deposition before a Dhaka court against Robiul Islam alias Arav Khan and nine others in a case filed over the killing of Special Branch inspector Mamun Imran Khan in July 2018.

Judge Faisal Atiq Bin Kader of Dhaka's First Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court recorded the statement of Imtiaz Mahbub, the then additional deputy commissioner of the Detective Branch of Police.

Later, the defence for all the accused cross-examined the witness on different points.

The court then fixed June 4 for the next hearing of the case.

On April 11 of 2019, DB police submitted a charge sheet against Arav Khan and nine others.

Arav Khan, who runs a jewellery store in Dubai, has an Interpol red alert against him.

On May 9 this year, another Dhaka court sentenced Arav to 10 years in jail in an arms case filed against him in January 2015.

US trade representative arrives tomorrow

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

US Acting Assistant Trade Representative for South and Central Asia Brendan Lynch will visit Bangladesh on May 20-24 to discuss ways of improving trade, investment and labour situation.

His visit schedule was confirmed by the foreign ministry spokesperson Shehli Sabrin yesterday.

Lynch will hold meetings with the officials of the ministries of commerce, labour, agriculture, post and telecommunication, as well as the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, and labour leaders, according to official sources.

Abductee's body found after 5 months

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police yesterday recovered the decomposed body of a young man in Maona, Gazipur, five months after he was abducted and killed by a gang that demanded Tk 10 lakh from his family.

The body of Amir Hossain, 25, was recovered from a septic tank based on information from the key accused Tarek Ahmed.

Tarek was arrested in Noakhali on Wednesday.

On December 28, 2022, an abductor called one of Amir's sisters using his phone and demanded Tk 10 lakh in ransom, which the family was unable to pay.

The next day, Tarek killed Amir and later that night he dumped the body into a septic tank.

1 killed over land dispute

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

A farmer was killed as two rival groups clashed over harvesting paddy from a piece of disputed land in Pabna's Santhia upazila yesterday.

The incident took place when the deceased Abdul Awal, 50, along with his men, went to stop paddy harvesting on the disputed land at Selonda village of Nagdemra union.

Santhia Police Station Officer-in-Charge (OC) Rafikul Islam said Abdul Awal and his nephew Amzad Hossain had a long-standing feud over a piece of inherited land in the village.

Mexico rescues 40 kidnapped migrants

AFP, Mexico City

Mexican authorities have rescued around 40 migrants who were briefly kidnapped this week while traveling on a bus, officials said yesterday.

Thousands of migrants fleeing violence and poverty in their countries risk abduction and exploitation at the hands of criminal gangs while crossing Mexico on the way to the US border.

These 40-odd people and two drivers were abducted Monday while traveling on a highway in northeastern Mexico.

Nine others from the same group -- which set off from southern Mexico near the Guatemalan border -- were rescued the same day of their abduction after managing to flee, according to officials.

Members of the National Guard were deployed to look for the others and found them Tuesday and Wednesday, national defense secretary Luis Crescencio Sandoval said.

The nine who were first rescued were aged between 18 and 35 years old and from Venezuela and Honduras, according to authorities in the northeastern state of Nuevo Leon.

Biman losing face, money

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737 while entering a hangar at the HSLA, causing significant damage to both planes.

In another incident, a Boeing 787-8 aircraft on June 16 last year, collided with the boarding bridge at HSLA.

Aviation experts and officials of different foreign airlines say the aforesaid incidents would not have happened if the individuals in charge of operating the aircraft and the equipment were more careful.

Experts said such incidents could have been avoided with careful operation of the aircraft, equipment and proper maintenance.

Officials of different foreign airlines said they might look for an alternative to Biman's services.

Since these bizarre incidents are happening amid discussions about handing over the ground handling operation to a foreign company, Biman should seriously investigate whether these "accidents" are deliberate, said aviation expert ATM Nazrul Islam.

"Taking the cargo loader close to a plane is not rocket science. Ground handling rules or protocols are not

properly followed by the people in charge," he added.

Several months ago, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed anger over these incidents.

Ministry Secretary Mokammel Hossain warned that Biman will not be in business if such incidents keep happening.

MA Momen, former Biman CEO, said these incidents keep occurring because the individuals responsible do not face punishment.

Amid complaints of Biman's poor luggage management, the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh hired a foreign contractor for the ground handling at the now under-construction third terminal.

If the two current terminals are also given to a third party, Biman is likely to lose the means to earn around Tk 1,500 crore a year.

Around 130 domestic and international flights carrying 25,000-30,000 passengers use HSLA every day.

As of now, only Biman provides ground and cargo handling support in Bangladesh.