

# US encourages Bangladesh to ‘root out corrupt actors’

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The US encourages Bangladesh to root out corrupt actors operating within its borders fairly and impartially, said State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller at a briefing yesterday.

His comment came in response to a question about US State Department Coordinator for Global Anti-Corruption Richard Nephew’s recent visit to Bangladesh.

The journalist also referred to The Daily Star’s report published on S Alam Group owner Saiful Alam’s business empire in Singapore and asked if the US intends to impose new sanctions, especially on those involved in corruption and money laundering.

Miller said the US never previews sanctions before they take place, but generally, sanctions can be a tool to fight corruption.

“And we encourage Bangladesh to root out corrupt actors operating with its – within its borders fairly and impartially.”

Matthew Miller, US State Department spokesperson

“We have other tools as well, such as freezing assets and giving partner nations information so they can prosecute cases.

“And we encourage Bangladesh to root out corrupt actors operating with its – within its borders fairly and impartially.”

The reporter in question, Mushfiqul Fazal Ansarey, while asking the question, said The Daily Star report was published during Nephew’s visit to Bangladesh, which is inaccurate as the investigative piece was published on August 4 and Nephew came to the country on August 6.

Mushfiqul was the assistant press secretary of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia when she was the prime minister.

During the briefing, he also said The Daily Star report revealed that Mohammed Saiful Alam, the owner of S Alam Group, had laundered more than \$1 billion abroad.

However, the report made no mention of money-laundering by S Alam. It said Alam had established a business empire worth more than \$1 billion in Singapore.



Local residents search for their belongings in the ruins of a house destroyed by recent shelling in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict in Donetsk, Russian-controlled Ukraine yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN 41 people dead in migrant shipwreck Says report citing accounts from survivors

REUTERS, Rome

Italian authorities yesterday said 41 migrants are thought to have died in a shipwreck last week in the central Mediterranean, according to accounts by survivors who have been taken to the island of Lampedusa.

Local public prosecutor Salvatore Vella confirmed media reports that four people who survived the shipwreck told rescuers they were on a boat carrying 45 people, including three children.

Vella’s office has opened an investigation into the incident.

The 7-metre-long boat set off on Thursday morning from Tunisia’s Sfax, a hot spot in the migration crisis, but capsized and sank after a few hours when hit by a big wave, the survivors were quoted as saying by Italian news agency Ansa.

The Sea-Watch charity rescue group said one of its surveillance planes spotted them being rescued by a cargo ship. They were then transferred onto an Italian coast guard vessel and disembarked in Lampedusa, where they shared their story.

“They said they were among the few

aboard (the sunken boat) with a life jacket, and (after the shipwreck) they remained in the water until they found another empty boat”, Sea-Watch said in a statement.

The migrants arrived in Lampedusa exhausted and in a state of shock, and are due to be questioned by police, prosecutor Vella said. They are presumed to have spent several days adrift at sea with no food or drinking water.

The Italian coast guard did not respond to a request for comment.

A source with knowledge of the matter said it was unlikely that the shipwreck experienced by the survivors was one of two the coast guard had reported on Sunday.

At the time, the coast guard said they had rescued 57 people and recovered two bodies, amid media reports that at least one of the sunken boats had also set off from Sfax on Thursday.

Separately, Tunisian authorities said on Monday that they had recovered 11 bodies from a shipwreck near Sfax on Sunday, with 44 migrants still missing from that sinking.

Italy, a major route into Europe for

hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers and other migrants, has seen an increase in migrant boats so far this year, with around 93,750 migrant arrivals by sea according to interior ministry data.

The figure compared with about 44,950 arrivals in the same period of 2022.

In a separate incident, Morocco’s navy on Tuesday intercepted more than 50 sub-Saharan African migrants off the kingdom’s southwestern coast, state media said, the latest in a surge of attempted crossings to Spain from North Africa.

The naval unit was on patrol off the coast of Tantan when it assisted “56 would-be irregular migrants of sub-Saharan African origin aboard a makeshift boat,” state news agency MAP quoted a military source as saying.

Spain’s Canary Islands are only about 150 kilometres (93 miles) off southern Morocco, west of Tantan.

The Spanish islands have long been a draw for migrants seeking a better life in Europe, with many boats setting off from the coastline of Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania and Senegal.

## CRITICISM OF ‘SS POWER I PLANT’ HC stays DSA case against engineer

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday stayed the trial proceedings of a case filed against Shah Newaz Chowdhury, a diploma engineer, under the Digital Security Act (DSA) for criticising the construction of a coal power plant in Chattogram’s Banshkhali upazila on Facebook.

The court also issued a rule asking the state to explain in four weeks why the trial proceedings of the case against Shah Newaz, a resident of Banshkhali, should not be scrapped.

The stay order will be in effect till the disposal of the rule, ordered an HC bench of Justice SM Kuddus Zaman and Justice Shahed Nuruddin following a petition filed by Shah Newaz.

The state will move an appeal before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court challenging the HC order, said Deputy Attorney General Sujit Chatterjee Bappi.

According to Shah Newaz’s lawyer Abdullah Al Noman, Faruk Ahmed, the then chief coordinator of S Alam Group’s Banshkhali project, filed the case against his client with Banshkhali Police Station on May 27, 2021, a day after he criticised the “environment-destructing” coal power plant at Gandamara on Facebook.

In the case statement, the engineer was accused of posing a security threat to the power plant by instigating locals and spreading propaganda and misinformation, Faruk said, adding that S Alam Group is installing a coal-fired power plant – the SS Power I Plant – at Pashchim Gandamara.

Chattogram Cyber Tribunal on May 17 last year framed charges against Shah Newaz in the case.

## INDICTMENT IN NIKO GRAFT CASE HC begins hearing on Khaleda’s plea

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday started hearing on a petition filed by BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, challenging a lower court order that framed charges against her and seven others in the Niko corruption case.

After hearing arguments from Khaleda Zia’s lawyer Kayser Kamal and the Anti-Corruption Commission’s lawyer Khurshid Alam Khan, the bench of Justice Mustafa Zaman Islam and Justice Md Aminul Islam fixed August 14 for the next hearing.

On May 17, the BNP chairperson filed the revision petition with the HC to scrap the trial court order, saying the charges were framed illegally. On March 19, Khaleda, the former prime minister, and seven others were indicted in the case.

The ACC filed the case on December 9, 2007, accusing Khaleda and several others of abusing power to award a gas exploration and extraction deal to Canadian company Niko when she was prime minister between 2001 and 2006.

## Key areas of concern stay

FROM PAGE 1

“Your (journalists’) concerns are of great importance to the government. I can say that you will be happy with the amendments,” Law Minister Anisul Huq had told reporters at the Secretariat on 25 July.

The OCHCR in its technical note called on the government to amend section 31 and only penalise speech “within the narrow scope of incitement to hatred.”

“An amended version of section 31 should define incitement narrowly as the broader the definition in domestic legislation, the more it opens the door for arbitrary application,” it said.

The OCHCR had also recommended that the government amend section 32, which refers to “breaching of government secrecy” saying, “the broad scope of this section coupled with the harsh penalty of a maximum jail term of fourteen years and/or fine, could have a negative impact on investigative journalism.”

The section remains as is, with the only difference being a reduction in penalty to 7 years, and the offence is now bailable.

The OCHCR had also commented that section 21 of the law be changed. This section, which criminalises any kind of propaganda or campaign against the Liberation War, spirit of the Liberation War, Father of the Nation, national anthem or national flag, was called overly broad by the UN body.

It said that this criminalised legitimate expression, lacked precision and made it difficult for individuals to regulate their conduct to avoid prosecution.

“The harshness of the penalty, including life imprisonment for repeat offences, could act as a deterrent to legitimate public discourse,” it said, asking the government to repeal this section.

The section has been kept intact, and this is still a non-bailable offence, although the jail term has been reduced from 10 years to seven.

The OCHCR had also pointed out that the Digital Security Act allows for warrantless searches, seizures and arrests if a police officer believes “that an offence under this Act has been

or is being committed, or is likely to be committed in any place”. The UN body had said that Bangladesh should amend this section to ensure that law enforcing officers know what kinds of expression are restricted, and safeguards are put in place to make sure that there is no abuse of power.

The section, previously section 43 and currently section 42, remains as is, word-for-word.

In addition to these, a group of civil society members had met the law minister on March 30, and submitted a recommendation pointing out that the law is being used disproportionately against minors, and that the law includes nothing to ensure that their rights are protected.

This recommendation was not taken up although there are approximately 20 children in prison, incarcerated under this law, said the civil society group, including Dr Iltekaruzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh; Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua; Professor CR Abrar and others.

“There is no alternative to repealing the law because it violates fundamental rights and the rights of citizens,” the group had said in its submission to the minister.

Experts point out that the issue with the law is not just with its penalties, but the offences described under the law.

DSA Tracker shows that the majority of those filing the cases are politicians (38.7 percent) and 80 percent of those politicians are directly linked with the ruling party.

While Awami League leaders and activists filed as many as 246 cases, only three of those cases were from BNP, two were from Jatiya Party, and one each from Islami Andolon, Hefajat-e-Islam and Communist Party Bangladesh.

Dr CR Abrar, an academician who was a part of this civil society group, said that the new Cyber Security Act is nowhere near the recommendations they made.

“Our only recommendation was to repeal the law. The minister was adamant that the law must be kept and amended, but we pointed out that amendment is not an option,” he told The Daily Star yesterday.

## Thousands

FROM PAGE 1

Suman Singha, executive engineer of Roads and Highways Department in Chattogram, said Chattogram-Cox’s Bazar highway was still under water in Hasimpur of Chandanaish, Keranirhat of Satkania and Chakaria.

Several hundred vehicles were stranded on Chattogram-Cox’s Bazar highway in Chandanaish and Satkania yesterday.

Ashraf Ullah, a lorry driver who was stuck in Satbaria area of Chandanaish, said, “I have to go to Chakaria in Cox’s Bazar. But I am now stuck here. I have to stay at the wheel round the clock. My helper had to walk around three kilometres to buy dry food from a shop.”

Floodwaters have submerged many areas in Chandanaish.

Jebo Hossain, who took shelter at Satbaria Government Primary School in Chandanaish, said they had been staying at the school for two days.

“We are now living on dry food. We cannot even contact our relatives as our mobile phones ran out of battery power. As the tube-wells have gone under water, we have to walk several kilometres to fetch drinking water,” said Ovi Nath, a resident of Chandanaish.

Floodwaters have receded from the streets of the port city, but many of those have been damaged.

Officials of Water Development Board (WDB) think torrential rains and rise in the water level in the Bay of Bengal under the influence of full moon during high tide worsened the flood situations in Chattogram, Bandarban and Cox’s Bazar.

Floodwaters usually recede from the region, including Chandanaish, Satkania, Lohagara of Chattogram, and Chakaria, Pekua of Cox’s Bazar, through the Sangu, Matamuhuri and Dalu rivers, said Tanjir Saif Ahmed, executive engineer of WDB in Cox’s Bazar.

But floodwaters did not recede this time as the water level in the Bay rose. As a result, flooding wreaked havoc across this region, which is the worst flood since 1996, he added.

[Arun Bikash Dey, Mohammad Suman, FM Mizanur Rahaman, Sifayet Ullah, Mokammel Shuvo and Mong Sing Hai Marma contributed to this report.]

## Govt allows 2 pvt firms to import LNG for 1st time

FROM PAGE 1

Officials concerned for comments despite repeated attempts.

“Due to the increasing demand for natural gas and the decreasing reserve of local gas fields, it was challenging for us to meet the demand. An increase in economic activities will further widen the gap between the demand and supply of natural gas in the future. Under the circumstances, the government has identified imported liquefied natural gas as a major alternative to the country’s natural gas,” reads the recently amended regulations.

“The government is now importing LNG under G2G (government to government) contracts, but it will need to encourage the private sector’s involvement to ensure the uninterrupted supply and highest utilisation,” it added.

Bangladeshi conglomerate Summit

and US gas shipping company Excelerate – they each have one Floating Storage Regasification Unit (FSRU) in Cox’s Bazar. FSRUs are terminals for regasification of LNG. Summit and Excelerate receive payment from the government for regasification at their respective FSRUs.

Earlier in June, Summit got the government nod to build its second FSRU.

In another meeting of the cabinet committee on purchase, three gas-fired power plants, owned by Summit, got a five-year extension. The plants are in Ashulia, Madhabdi and Chandina. They have a power generation capacity of 71.55MW.

“With this extension, Summit will receive Tk 1,118 crore in the extended period at a cost of Tk 5.64 per unit electricity,” reads the meeting minutes.

The purchase committee also

approved the import of 33.60 lakh MMBtu LNG from the spot market from TotalEnergies Gas and Power Ltd of Switzerland. The shipment will cost Tk 478.64 crore in total and per unit cost will be \$11.17.

The committee also approved a 50MW solar power plant in Nilphamari’s Dimla upazila. From this power plant, the Bangladesh Power Development Board will purchase electricity at a rate of Tk 10.69 per kilowatt-hour.

According to the meeting minutes, the food ministry will purchase 50,000 tonnes of wheat from Agrocrop International Pte of Singapore at a cost of \$297.47 per tonne.

The ministry of commerce will purchase 160 lakh litre soybean oil for the Trading Company of Bangladesh (TCB), at a cost of Tk 159.45 per litre from Bashundhara Multi Food Products Ltd.

## Discussions should be held with the media

FROM PAGE 1

Secretary Dewan Hanif Mahmud.

Ever since the enactment of DSA in 2018, the Editors’ Council and other media stakeholders expressed serious concerns.

The council is waiting to see where the government stands regarding the replacement of the DSA with the Cyber Security Act.

“The government did not take into account the concerns of media stakeholders, including the Editors’ Council, when it enacted the Digital Security Act in 2018.

“It was expected that the stakeholders would be consulted and their views would be taken into consideration in case of an amendment or repeal.

“But it seems the government is taking steps to prepare the draft of the proposed cyber security law without doing anything like this,” said the statement.

The government has not officially released any details about the proposed cyber security law.

The council cannot but fear that nothing has changed, except in some instances, sentences were reduced and non-bailable offences were made bailable.

Offences under sections 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 31, 32 and 46 of the DSA are non-bailable. In the draft law, offences under these sections will be bailable.

It is pointless to simply change the name of the law, the council said.

When it comes to defamation by reporting, the provision of a fine of Tk 25 lakh has replaced imprisonment. But if the punishment for defamation under the penal code is not amended, the new provision will be ineffective, it added.

Secondly, if the fine of Tk 25 lakh is not paid, the accused will face imprisonment.

There has been a demand for repealing sections 21 and 28 of the DSA because those are against freedom of expression.

Both nationally and internationally, these sections

are deemed as tools for harassing political opponents. Keeping these two provisions by reducing the punishment will leave scope for their misuse, the council added.

It is more worrying that section 32 of the DSA has been kept, it said, adding that the colonial-era Official Secrets Act of 1923 is still in place.

The colonial rulers enacted that act because they did not trust the people of this country. There is no justification for this law in independent Bangladesh, said the statement. According to section 43 of the DSA, police could enter homes, search offices and individuals, and seize computers, computer networks, servers and digital platforms.

Police can arrest anyone on suspicion without needing a warrant.

“This virtually gives the police some kind of ‘judicial power’ which is unacceptable. Since this section also remains in place, the new cyber security law cannot be considered as something new.”