

3-member EU team arrives today to assess labour reforms

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A three-member European Union delegation will arrive in Dhaka today on a five-day visit to assess the progress of Bangladesh's labour sector reforms.

The team, led by EU External Service Action Service's Deputy Managing Director (Asia Pacific Division) Paola Pampaloni, will hold meetings with trade unions, civil society organisations, and top officials of the ministries of foreign affairs, commerce, and labour, according to foreign ministry officials.

The visit comes at a time when readymade garment workers have been demonstrating for better pay amid the sharp rise in prices of essential commodities, while opposition political parties are enforcing blockades one after another following BNP's October 28 rally ahead of the upcoming national elections.

Police sued 11,000 unnamed workers over vandalism and clashes with law enforcers in Gazipur this week during a labour unrest that followed the government's announcement of a new minimum wage of Tk 12,500, up from Tk 8,000.

However, the workers are demanding Tk 25,000 as the monthly minimum wage.

The EU delegation will raise the issues of minimum wage, freedom of trade union, and implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) in the labour sector, a trade union leader told The Daily Star yesterday.

Bangladesh adopted the NAP (2021-2026) on the labour sector, which is linked to a roadmap submitted by Bangladesh to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Governing Body.

The roadmap aims to improve the country's observance of labour rights, including freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, a labour ministry official said.

The EU is Bangladesh's largest export destination: total exports to the EU amounted to €24 billion in 2022. The EU has been providing Bangladesh duty-free access to its market while also helping improve safety in the RMG sector since the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina waves at locals who gathered along the rail line to greet her on her way to Ramu from Cox's Bazar by a train yesterday.

PHOTO: BSS

Hold Bangladesh authorities accountable for rights abuses

Amnesty International urges UN member states

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amnesty International yesterday said the UN member states must use the UN's upcoming Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Bangladesh to hold the authorities accountable for "gross human rights violations and rapidly deteriorating human rights situation" ahead of the country's general election.

"Bangladesh's fourth UPR is taking place at a time when human rights and critical institutions, opposition leaders, independent media houses and civil society are facing systematic attacks ahead of national elections.

"This assessment presents an important opportunity for UN member states to scrutinise Bangladesh's human rights records and to hold the authorities accountable for violations of their international human rights obligations

and commitments," said a statement quoting Livia Saccardi, the rights watchdog's deputy regional director for campaigns for South Asia.

The UN Human Rights Council's UPR takes place every four years.

"In the last UPR in May 2018, the [Bangladesh] government accepted recommendations to safeguard the right to freedom of expression; however, in the past five years it has persistently undermined the right including through perfunctory reform and weaponization of various laws. The new Cyber Security Act 2023 retains the draconian features of the former Digital Security Act."

The government must bring the Cyber Security Act in line with international human rights law and ensure it is not used to target human rights defenders, activists, critics and crackdown on peaceful dissent, it said.

Kali Puja today

BSS, Dhaka

Kali Puja or Shyama Puja, the second largest festival of the Bangalee Hindu community, will be celebrated across the country today.

Kali Puja is also called "Deepabali" or "Divali" -- the festival of lights.

Usually, the worshipping of the goddess of strength, wisdom and enlightenment, is celebrated on the night of Amavasya of the Bangla month of Karthik (October or November).

On the night of the festival, members of the Hindu community light earthen lamps (pradeep) at their houses, temples, and crematoriums in memory of their departed elderly persons.

In the capital, the Shyama Puja will be celebrated at Dhakeshwari Temple, Siddheshwari Kali Temple, Ramna Kali Mandir, Sri Sri Baradeshwari Kalimata Temple, Radha Gobinda Jee's Thakur Temple, Postogola crematorium, Ramkrishna Mission, Biharilal Jee's Temple, Gautam Mandir, Ramseeta Mandir, and Shibmandir.

Spin doctors go into overdrive

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In some cases, when the content was outright fake news, fact checkers were able to intervene and debunk those. But a great number of them are disinformation and they continue to flood the cyberspace to build a narrative to serve vested interests.

"Disinformation is being used for warfare and it will be used to impact public sentiment in the upcoming elections. The political groups are not spreading fake news unintentionally at all," said Din M Sumon Rahman, professor of Media Studies and Journalism at the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh.

Sumon also runs a fact-checking lab called FactWatch.

Disinformation is different from fake news in that they are spread intentionally, often with a malicious objective. While fake news can also be spread with nasty intents, sometimes they result from honest mistakes and oversights.

Over the last two months, The Daily Star has examined several hundred posts on dozens of Facebook pages, groups and messaging apps run by some identified, but mostly unidentified, "admins".

Although based on a small sample and is therefore in no way definitive, some patterns have emerged from our findings.

Analysis shows, Awami League sympathisers are running anti-BNP propaganda both by bots (fake profiles created to spread disinformation) as well as traceable individuals or groups on Facebook.

Squeezed between the Digital Security Act and state agencies tasked with weeding out "anti-state" content from social media, the "cyber warriors" of BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami and other opposition parties seem to be reliant on spamming in unnamed Telegram channels and group chats and "foreign influencers".

Some of these pro-opposition foreign influencers are Bangladeshi nationals now living abroad, dishing out disinformation among tens of thousands of followers.

Many of the social media groups, on all sides, identify themselves as news organisations, and are categorised as "news sites" in Facebook. However, they have no discernible authors or publishers.

Another tactic involves sabotaging the opposition -- by pretending to be from the opposition parties, such as by opening pages bearing names of the opposition party or its leaders, and then disseminating disinformation about the opposition.

Yet another tactic is using a "thirst trap" where a page is created as a fake female profile. An audience base is built by posting photos and videos of women and girls to entice followers. Subsequently, the page switches gears and starts posting the contents they want to disseminate -- in this case political disinformation.

Many of these groups cover their tracks and are run by profiles that function like social media bots. It is incredibly difficult to find an actual profile of a person as an admin of these groups.

Some of the telltale ways to recognise a bot include scanty information on the profile, stock photos as profile photos, a plethora of friends of wildly different backgrounds and locked profiles.

PRO-AL CYBER WARRIORS

Between August 28 and 29, a fake video claiming that the former United Nations resident coordinator to Bangladesh made a statement saying how Bangladeshi elections do not need to be held under UN supervision. The video was cross-posted across 39 pages.

Cross-posting is a special Facebook feature that allows uploading of posts on multiple pages from a central content library in a coordinated way.

An analysis of several posts made by these pages show that the same group of Facebook pages like Dhaka Television, Bangladesher Rajniti, Breaking News-Live, Sports 24x7 and several others, cross-post various contents in a coordinated manner.

All these pages are categorised as "news sites" in Facebook.

Dhaka Television, for example, has a website, but there is no contact information, nor any information about its publisher.

It also does not exist on the list of registered television channels in Bangladesh, nor does its corresponding news portal exist on the registration lists of the information ministry. It is also not among the registered IPTVs (internet protocol televisions). The website uses a foreign IP address, of a cloud server based in Singapore, making it impossible to track its local address.

On the night of October 29, a day after the street violence centring on BNP's rally, Dhaka Television, Breaking News-Live, Bangladesher Rajniti and News Update posted a video titled "Daily Star out to save BNP criminals" all within two minutes -- between 10:29pm and 10:31pm.

The video seeks to discredit a news report by The Daily Star interviewing the driver who said on the record that

two men wearing "police vests" set a bus on fire on Malibagh flyover in the capital.

Police later analysed CCTV footage and arrested one alleged imposter who was wearing a bullet-proof jacket with "Press" written on it. The driver only identified the bullet-proof jacket as a police vest.

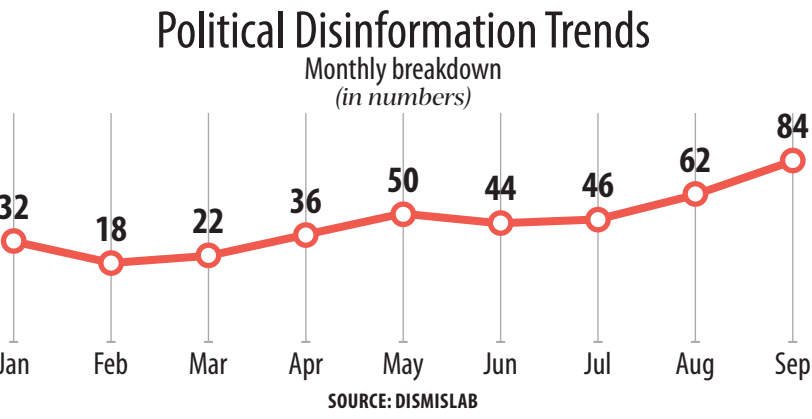
Dhaka Television is the owner of the video, while the other three cross-

Sajid said he has been through "The Drill."

PRO-OPPOSITION CYBER WARRIORS

On October 29, the day after its Nayapaltan rally, BNP's social media wings made two photo cards, claiming former journalist leader Rafiq Bhuiyan died after police hit him with teargas.

In actuality, he died after falling off the rickshaw while going to the Jatiya



posted it. After the initial post, the page of Dhaka Television then posted this video in at least 23 Facebook groups before midnight that day, a Facebook search shows.

In the last one year, Dhaka Television paid \$800 for ads across four pages including its own, according to Facebook's Ad Library.

Out of the dozens of groups examined by this newspaper, only three real people stood out as admins or moderators.

One of them is a member of Awami League's relief and social welfare subcommittee Ariful Islam Arif, also a member of Young Bangla, the youth platform of the ruling party's Centre for Research and Information (CRI)

Arif, who is the admin of at least five groups, said, "Not all the pages are run by the party."

Another prominent admin is Mahmud Bin Sajid, a graduate student at Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University.

"We have around 300 groups that we use to run our campaign. We spread news about the development work of the government, and tackle fake news spread by the opposition," said Sajid, who is the admin of at least 12 groups that this newspaper scanned.

Called "The Drill," the ruling party's web team provides training on how to evade blocking and removals, and how to "evade" the "trap of fact-checking", shows a post made on September 25, seeking recruits for a workshop on "Facebook Blocking/Restrictions".

were stand up for #VotingRights at an opposition party's grand rally," the post read in English.

In a separate message made in their Telegram channels, the platform asked everyone to retweet the content.

To cover the October 28 rally, The Daily Star fielded nine reporters and five photojournalists. Other media houses deployed their own reporters and camerapersons, a few hundreds of them. None of them, including the 14 journalists of this newspaper, reported seeing any such bodies anywhere.

Basherkella did not respond to our request for comment.

An analysis of some pro-BNP Facebook pages that are used to spread anti-government sentiments, disinformation and rumours shows that many of their admins are located abroad.

On the other hand, the admins of some 50 pro-AL pages that we examined are almost all located in Bangladesh, show Facebook's transparency features.

GOVT INTERCEPTION

Since 2017, Bangladesh has been using Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) method to gather publicly available information and to act accordingly.

Through this method, National Telecommunications Monitoring Centre carries out "social media interception" as part of its cyberspace monitoring. It also uses a content blocking and filtering system to counter anti-state content, according to its latest quarterly report.

Over the last three months, the Cyber and Special Crime Division of police shut down operations of at least 700 pages, IDs, and social media groups for spreading rumours.

"Vested quarters are trying to spread rumours and propaganda to portray Bangladesh as a dysfunctional state ahead of the national election. Rab's monitoring cell is constantly working on it," said Commander Khandaker Al Moin, director of the legal and media wing of Rab.

However, law enforcers cannot take down any social media content posted from outside the country.

"They cannot be brought back for legal reasons so they are constantly spreading disinformation," said Md Najmul Islam, additional deputy commissioner of the CTTC's cyber crime unit.

Law enforcement officials will not say it openly, but social media analysts say the government agencies predominantly target anti-government actors.

Election Commission officials say they are aware of the disinformation campaign on social media ahead of

UGC member urges teachers to ensure 80pc turnout in polls

ARAFAT RAHAMAN

University Grants Commission Member Professor Sazzad Hossain yesterday urged university teachers to work towards bringing "at least 80 percent voters" to polling stations for the 12th national election.

Speaking at an event initiated by the Education, Research and Development Forum of Bangladesh at the capital's International Mother Language Institute, he said university teachers have to play a role in bringing young voters to the polls.

Around 30 senior teachers, including vice-chancellors, pro-vice chancellors, and principals of public colleges across the country attended the event.

"We will build a modern country with education, research and development, which was initiated by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his daughter Sheikh Hasina, who started Smart Bangladesh ... Sajeeb Wazed Joy, son of Hasina, initiated Digital Bangladesh."

He also urged all universities and institutions to take a stance against violence and corruption.

The UGC is the autonomous apex body to oversee the universities of Bangladesh, and its chairman and members usually refrain from speaking about politics, according to the commission's sources.

Contacted, Sazzad said, "I didn't mean any specific political party. I only spoke about the victory of democracy. It could be any party. If we can encourage young voters, and they can vote fairly, then it would be better for us, our education..."

Contacted, former Bangladesh UGC Chairman Prof Abdul Mannan said, "No one should make such remarks while holding such a post at a respective commission. Every such post has its limits and parameters, which should be followed."

240 officials promoted to deputy secretaries ahead of election

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

In the latest reshuffle in the public administration, the government has promoted 240 government officials to the rank of deputy secretary.

The public administration ministry issued a gazette notification in this regard yesterday.

Nine government officials holding the rank of senior assistant secretary are currently stationed in various foreign embassies and missions.

According to ministry sources, there are a little more than 600 deputy secretary positions in the administration. However, with the latest promotion, the number of deputy secretaries in the administration stands at 1,718.

The promotions come ahead of the 12th parliamentary election, slated for January next year.

the election.

In August, Facebook and TikTok officials sat with EC officials to discuss the matter.

"We discussed how to prevent propaganda that spreads via Facebook, especially hate speech and communal speech, and disinformation. We also discussed how these will be deleted, removed, and blocked," EC Additional Secretary Ashok Kumar Debnath said about their meeting with Facebook.

England KO Babar and Co

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title defence on a high in Kolkata yesterday.

Stokes, who came out of ODI retirement for the World Cup, scored 84 while Joe Root hit 60 to lift England to an impressive 337 for nine in their 50 overs before Pakistan folded on 244 in 43.3 overs.

Wiley, who already announced he will retire from international cricket after the World Cup, removed Pakistan openers Abdullah Shafique and Fakhar Zaman early before dismissing Agha Salman for 51 to finish with 3-56.

Fellow fast bowler Gus Atkinson (2-45) had Babar Azam for 38, caught at short mid-wicket off a miscued pull to end the Pakistan skipper's below-par tournament on 320 runs with four fifties but without a century.

Tail enders Shaheen Shah Afridi scored 27 and Harris Rauf made 35 to at least take Pakistan past the 200 mark. Pakistan started the day needing to beat England by 287 runs in order to squeeze into the semi-finals on net run-rate but that escape route was immediately closed when Jos Buttler won the toss and chose to bat first.

As a result, New Zealand became the fourth team into the semi-finals.

Earlier, Stokes -- dropped on 10 by Shaheen off his own bowling -- rode his luck during a 76-ball innings.

Stokes and Root built on a solid opening stand of 82 between Jonny Bairstow (59) and David Malan (31), taking full advantage of a slow Eden Gardens pitch and some wayward bowling.

Once Stokes, who came out of ODI retirement for the World Cup, got a life he continued to bat like he did during his century against the Netherlands in Pune three days ago, cracking 11 boundaries and two sixes.

Pakistan finished in fifth place in the 10-nation table while England are a further two places down, but still able to qualify for the 2025 Champions Trophy.