

Not concerned over US policy on workers’ rights

Says Momen; foreign secy holds talks with US envoy
DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen yesterday said there was nothing to worry about regarding the recently-launched US policy on workers’ rights, as businesses in Bangladesh and the US are operated by the private sector.

“Exports won’t stop just because of a government directive. The private sector often doesn’t care about the government. They import products because they get them at cheap prices, good quality and timely delivery,” he told journalists at the foreign ministry.

He was asked about a recent letter sent by the Bangladesh embassy in Washington to the commerce ministry in Bangladesh, regarding the possible measures, like trade penalties and visa restrictions, over labour rights issues.

Momen, however, said he has not read the letter.

As per the memorandum rolled out by the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on November 16, the US could impose sanctions, trade penalties and visa restrictions on the violators of labour rights under the new policy.

Yesterday, US Ambassador Peter Haas met Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen at the Padma state guest house.

Asked if the policy was discussed, the foreign minister said, “It was a routine meeting after the ambassador’s return to Dhaka from leave, and that there is no reason to be worried about the US policy.”

Meanwhile, the US embassy in a Facebook post reiterated Haas held a routine meeting “to discuss the ongoing developments” in the bilateral relationship.

Asked if such measures would affect Bangladesh’s RMG sector, whose major markets are in the US and EU, Momen said, “We don’t want the progress [in trade relations] we have made to be affected. Though we are an LDC, we are a model country of export-led growth. It will be surely be a problem if the sector is affected.”

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Displaced Palestinian children queue for food and bread donations in the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

POLLS CODE VIOLATIONS EC asks 17 AL nominees to explain

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission yesterday asked 17 ruling Awami League nominees, including four ministers, to explain why they had violated the electoral code of conduct.

In Savar, an electoral enquiry committee served a notice to Enamur Rahman, the state minister for disaster management.

The committee asked Enamur to come up with an explanation by 5:00pm today.

In Natore-3, AL nominee Zunaid Ahmed Palak, also the state minister for ICT, received a similar notice, sources said.

In Narayanganj-1, Golam Dastagir Gazi, minister for textiles, was asked to appear before the enquiry committee in person and explain.

In Gazipur-2, Zahid Ahsan Russel, state minister for sports, was asked to submit an explanation by 3:00pm on Sunday.

In Magura-1, star cricketer and AL nominee Shakib Al Hasan was asked to appear before the committee in person today at 3:00pm and explain why punitive action should not be taken against him.

AL nominees Mohibbur Rahman of Patuakhali-4, Raziuddin Ahmed Razu of Narsingdi-5, Tushar Kanti Mandal of Rangpur-3, and Mrinal Kanti Das of Munshiganj-3 also received notices.

Narsingdi Chhatra League President Ahsanul Islam alias Rimam was asked to explain why action should not be taken against him for breaching the electoral code of conduct.

UN calls on all parties to ensure people can vote freely

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The United Nations called on all parties involved to ensure that the people of Bangladesh are able to express their votes and opinions freely.

Stéphane Dujarric, spokesperson for the UN secretary-general, said this while responding to a question during a regular press briefing yesterday.

A reporter asked him about a recent Human Rights Watch report which, according to the reporter, said that a free and fair election was impossible in Bangladesh amid “ongoing systematic crackdown on opposition members and critics”.

Polls code takes leave on the last day

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Chattogram-12, and AL nominee for Chattogram-16 Mustafizur Rahman Chowdhury were among those who violated the polls code.

Shamshul went to the RO’s office with police protection and the national flag hoisted on his SUV, which are violations of the electoral code.

He said, “If the code of conduct comes into force after the announcement of the schedule, then I will say that I have not yet entered my constituency with the flag.”

Mustafizur and his followers allegedly beat up three journalists and broke cameras and tripods at the Chattogram DC office around 11:30am.

Eyewitnesses said Mustafizur first attacked a journalist when the latter asked him whether he violated the electoral code by bringing over 100 people. As the other journalists protested, the incumbent lawmaker and his followers attacked them too.

When the journalists complained to Chattogram RO Abul Bashir Mohammad Fakhruzzaman, he regretted the incident and assured them of investigating.

AL nominee for Chattogram-9 and Deputy Minister for Education Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury Nowled, Chattogram-10 lawmaker Mohiuddin Bacchu, Chattogram-II MP MA Latif, and Chattogram-10 independent candidate and also an AL leader Arshadul Alam Bacchu violated the code by bringing a huge number of people with them while submitting the nomination papers.

Independent Murad Siddique of Tangail-5 went to the RO’s office with a few hundred supporters in a procession of motorbikes and other vehicles around 11:00am. Murad is the younger brother of Krishak Sramik Janata League President Abdul Kader Siddique.

AL nominees for Tangail-5 Mamunur

Rashid and Tangail-2 Tanvir Hassan Soto Monir went to the RO’s office with a few thousand activists in motorcades.

Independent Jamilur Rahman Miron of Tangail-5, also the organising secretary of district AL, also went to the RO’s office with a few hundred supporters.

All four delivered speeches to their supporters in front of the RO’s office.

Contacted, Tangail RO Kaiserul Islam told this newspaper that he requested every candidate to follow the electoral code.

In Sunamganj, independent Selim Ahmed, also a former district president of pro-AL Sramik League, took out a huge procession before submitting his nomination papers for Sunamganj-1.

Contacted, he said, “The people gathered and accompanied me to the town. I did not ask them to come and I was not able to stop them. Considering the electoral rules, I entered the office of the returning officer with only a handful of people.”

AL nominees for Sunamganj-1 Ranjit Chandra Sarker and Sunamganj-2 Chowdhury Abdulla Al Mahmud also staged a huge show of strength.

Incumbent AL lawmaker Joya Sengupta of Sunamganj-2 and also an independent runner went to the RO’s office with a huge number of supporters.

Sunamganj RO Dider-E-Alam Mohammed Maksud Chowdhury said he would enquire into the allegations and take necessary action.

AL candidate for Sylhet-6 Nurul Islam Nahid, also former education minister, took out a huge procession for submitting his nomination papers.

He said, “People came willingly and I requested them to keep quiet and not violate the electoral rules.”

AL nominees Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury for Sylhet-2, Habibur Rahman Habib for Sylhet-3, and Imran

Ahmed for Sylhet-4, also staged shows of strength while submitting their nomination papers.

AL leader Sarwar Hossain running as an independent in Sylhet-6 also had a few hundred people along with him while submitting his nomination papers.

Sheikh Russel Hasan, RO of Sylhet, could not be reached for comments.

Ruling party nominee for Manikganj-2 Momtaz Begum went to the RO’s office in a motorcade of over 100 motorbikes.

Kamruzzaman Kamrul, an independent for Narsingdi-1 and also the joint general secretary of district AL, had several thousand people with him while he submitted his nomination papers.

Narsingdi RO Badiul Alam said they would take legal action if the allegations were found to be true.

Law Minister Anisul Haq, AL nominee for Brahmanbaria-4, held two rallies before submitting his nomination papers yesterday afternoon.

In Habiganj, 10 people were hurt in clashes between two groups of Chhatra League men at a rally organised by AL nominee for Habiganj-1 Mushfiq Hossain Chowdhury in Notun Bazar area in the morning.

Mushfiq submitted his nomination papers in the afternoon.

Habiganj-1 Assistant Returning Officer (ARO) Anupam Das Anup said he was not aware of the incident but Officer-in-Charge Md Masuk Ali of Nabiganj Police Station said police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control.

Most AL nominees in Rajshahi staged shows of strength, took out processions, and used motorcades while submitting nomination papers.

AL nominee for Rajshahi-6 Mohammad Shahriar Alam, also the state minister for foreign affairs,

staged a huge show of strength before submitting his nomination papers.

AL candidates Asaduzzaman Asad in Rajshahi-3, Abul Kalam Azad in Rajshahi-4, and Kazi Abdul Wadud Dara in Rajshahi-5 took out motorcycle processions.

Ruling party candidates Mohammad Ali Kamal in Rajshahi-2 and Omor Faruk Chowdhury MP in Rajshahi-1 submitted their nomination papers surrounded by several hundred supporters.

Party pick for Nilphamari-1 Abtabuddin Sarker had several thousand followers with him inside the Domar upazila complex while submitting the papers.

Domar Upazila Nirbahi Officer Nazmul Alam claimed that he did not notice the huge number of people on the premises.

AL nominee for Pirojpur-1 SM Rezaul Karim, also the fisheries and livestock minister, staged a huge show of strength while submitting his form.

President of district AL and independent AKMA Awal of the same constituency had several thousand followers in procession with him.

In Thakurgaon-2, AL-backed Mazharul Islam and independent Ali Aslam submitted their nomination papers taking out processions, as did AL nominee Md Imdadul Haque, Jatiya Party’s Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, and Workers Party’s Gopal Chandra Roy in Thakurgaon-3.

AL candidates for Natore-1 Shahidul Islam Bakul and Natore-4’s Siddiqueur Rahman Patwary had several hundred followers with them.

AL nominee Nazrul Islam Babu in Narayanganj-2, JP candidate Liakat Hossain Khoka in Narayanganj-3 and independent Shajahan Bhuiyan in Narayaganj-1 took out processions for submitting nomination papers.

[Our district correspondents contributed to the report]

Bangladesh’s duty access

FROM PAGE 1

Organisation and civil society.

“GSP preferences can be removed if beneficiary countries fail to respect core human rights and labour rights,” the EU said.

For instance, on 12 February 2020, the EC decided to withdraw part of the tariff preferences granted to Cambodia under the EU’s Everything But Arms (EBA) trade arrangement due to serious and systematic violations of the human rights principles enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

For Bangladesh, the EU’s key concerns on labour rights are related to: legal obstacles to the right to establish trade unions, elect representatives of trade unions and organise freely trade unions’ activities; minimum membership requirements to form a trade union; and the absence of trade unions in the export processing zones (EPZs).

Another area of concern is anti-union discrimination, including violence, harassment, dismissal, and arrest of workers with insufficient investigations and prosecutions of cases.

The EU called for increasing the pace of implementing the commitments on labour rights included in the National Action Plan (NAP) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) roadmap.

Following intense and productive technical discussions with the EU, the labour ministry in September 2021 published the NAP on the labour sector for 2021-2026 with timelines for reforms.

While the Bangladesh Labour Rules and the EPZ Labour Rules, and sub-rules to the Labour Act/EPZ Labour Act have been revised and adopted in 2022, they still fall short of compliance with international labour standards.

The government committed to recruiting 942 additional posts for labour inspectors by the end of 2023 but almost 200 posts of labour inspectors, making up for about one-third of the existing posts, remain unfilled.

The government needed to follow up on its commitments to remediate factories ensuring the safety of workers, including by sending closure notices to factories where necessary as per the NAP.

It should step up its efforts to investigate and prosecute alleged cases of violence and harassment against workers and their representatives.

The EU also has key concerns on human rights related to freedom of expression, both online and offline; freedom of assembly and civil society space; and allegations of torture, ill-treatment, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.

The authorities should also fully implement the recommendations of the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review, including the abolition of the death penalty, as well as the conclusions of UN treaty monitoring bodies.

“The full compliance with the GSP relevant international conventions should also be seen in the light of

the expected future graduation of Bangladesh from LDC status, which would imply moving from the EBA arrangement to standard GSP,” the report said.

Under the standard GSP, the low and lower-middle income countries can get partial or full removal of customs duties on two-thirds of tariff lines on their shipments to the EU.

It is important that Bangladesh can demonstrate that it meets its obligations under the GSP regulation, in particular the labour rights reforms under the NAP and the respect of international human rights standards, the report said.

HC scraps verdict

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Muhammad Yunus is the founder and chairman of Grameen Kalyan, a charitable organisation.

The labour court can give an interpretation under the law, said the bench of Justice Zafar Ahmed and Justice Khandaker Diliruzzaman.

It delivered the verdict after hearing a writ petition filed by Grameen Kalyan challenging the tribunal’s judgment.

Petitioner’s lawyer Abdullah Al Mamun said Grameen Kalyan need not to pay any profit money to its workers following the HC judgement.

The Labour Appellate Tribunal had declared the demand valid going beyond its jurisdiction as it is only empowered to give an interpretation if there is any dispute over any contract between the company and the workers under section 231 of the Labour Act 2006, he told The Daily Star.

But no contract was signed between the Grameen Kalyan and its workers, and therefore, the judgement delivered by the tribunal on April 3 is beyond the law, Mamun said.

The demand of 106 retired workers is illegal as Grameen Kalyan is merely a charitable organisation and it is not involved in industrial activities, he added.

Workers’ lawyer Khurshid Alam Khan told this correspondent that his clients would appeal against the HC verdict.

LAW VIOLATION CASE

In another case filed against Yunus and three top officials of Grameen Telecom over violation of the labour law, the defence made their arguments in a Dhaka court for the third consecutive day yesterday.

Sheikh Merina Sultana, chairman of the Third Labour Court of Dhaka, set December 6 for the next hearing in the case as the defence lawyers could not complete their arguments, Khaja Tanvir Ahmed, a lawyer for Yunus, told this newspaper.

Yunus, also the chairman of Grameen Telecom, and its top officials Ashraful Hassan, Nurjahan Begum and Mohammad Shahjahan appeared before the court yesterday.

Our court correspondent contributed to this report.