

Statement of UN human rights office on polls prejudiced

Says foreign ministry

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka says the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has overstepped its mandate and misrepresented the ground reality on the elections in Bangladesh.

"The statement is a repetition of subjective and biased assessments to politicise human rights," said foreign ministry in a statement yesterday.

On January 8, UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk voiced distress that the environment for the January 7 polls was marred by violence and repression of opposition candidates and supporters, while calling for thorough and effective investigation into the violations and irregularities.

The foreign ministry said the government's firm commitment to uphold the democratic principles was evident in the conduct of the polls.

"The election day was unprecedentedly peaceful, except for some isolated incidents in a few polling stations. This was echoed by many international election observers and journalists who covered the election on the ground," said the statement.

The UN high commissioner's claim that the "election was marred by violence and repression of opposition candidates" appears to be extremely prejudiced and premeditated, it said.

The ministry said regrettably, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) decided to stay out of the electoral process on the pretext of their unconstitutional demand for the provision of a caretaker government.

"It is unfortunate that the BNP resorted to violence and killing of innocent people to thwart the democratic process as the party did during earlier occasions of national elections," the statement added.

The ministry claimed that since October 28, 2023, BNP activists killed 24 individuals and set fire to nearly 1,000 vehicles, derailed and attacked trains and burnt passengers, including a mother and her three-year-old child, to death.

In this context, it was a challenge to ensure peaceful elections amidst threats, disruptions and violence aiming to destabilise the country and disrupt its democratic journey. Despite all these, the response from the law enforcers was restrained, rational and within the legal parameters, it said.

"OHCHR's allegations of reprisals such as arbitrary and mass arrests, threats, enforced disappearance, blackmailing and surveillance by law enforcement officials are baseless and unsubstantiated."

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Displaced Palestinian children play behind barbed wire on a sand dune overlooking a makeshift camp on the Egyptian border, west of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday, as the Israeli offensive in the Palestinian enclave enters its 100th day. PHOTO: AFP

125 more killed on 100th day of Gaza carnage

Israeli PM vows to continue offensive, says 'no one will stop us'; UN says situation in the Palestinian territory 'straining our shred humanity'

AGENCIES

Israeli strikes killed at least 125 people yesterday, the 100th day of the offensive which has ravaged the Gaza Strip prompting UN to call the situation in the besieged Palestinian territory "straining our shred humanity".

The offensive has created a dire humanitarian crisis for the 2.4 million people in Hamas-ruled Gaza, the United Nations and aid groups warn, and reduced much of the coastal strip to rubble.

Communications and internet services were down for the third day running, complicating the work of emergency and ambulance crews trying to help people in areas hit by fighting.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose government has faced growing international pressure over civilian casualties in Gaza, vowed that "no one will stop us" from destroying Hamas.

An overnight Israeli army strike on a house in Rafah killed 14 Palestinians, including a two-year-old girl. Over the past 24 hours, the Gaza health ministry said 125 people had been killed and 265 wounded, bringing the total number

confirmed to have been killed since the start of the offensive to 23,968 with more than 60,000 wounded.

The offensive also destroyed more than 60 percent of the infrastructure of Gaza and displaced more than 85 percent infrastructure of the impoverished and besieged enclave.

Death toll in enclave rises to 23,968

Iran demands 'just' ICJ ruling in genocide case against Israel

Israeli troops kill 4 fighters along Lebanon border

Israeli troops also killed four fighters who crossed from Lebanon at a disputed border area. Troops patrolling the area "identified a terrorist cell who crossed from Lebanon into Israeli territory and fired at the forces", the Israeli military said.

After the Hague-based International

Court of Justice (ICJ) heard arguments this week that accused Israel of breaching the UN Genocide Convention, Netanyahu insisted no court or military foe could stop Israel from achieving its aim of destroying Hamas.

"No one will stop us – not The Hague, not the Axis of Evil and no one else," he told a televised news conference later on Saturday, referring to the Iran-aligned "axis of resistance" groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi yesterday said the world is watching and demanding a "just" ruling from the ICJ on the genocide case against Israel, reports Al Jazeera online.

"I say to the legal experts of this court they must answer firstly to God, secondly to the global conscience, and thirdly to history and future generations," Raisi told religious figures from across the region invited to a conference in Tehran aimed at Islamic unity on Gaza.

France's President Emmanuel Macron called Saturday for fresh talks for the release of the hostages held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Polling agent of losing candidate shot dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Noakhali

Unidentified criminals shot dead a man, who was a polling agent for Noakhali-2 (Senbagh-Sonaimuri) independent candidate Ataur Rahman Bhuiyan Manik, in the January 7 national election.

Shaheduzzaman Palash, 35, of Sonaimuri upazila, was an agent at the Purba Mirzanagar Government Primary School polling centre during the election.

Locals first saw Shaheduzzaman's body, bearing bullet wounds, near his house in the Purba Mirzanagar area on Saturday around 10:00pm.

Police later took the body to Noakhali General Hospital morgue for post mortem yesterday morning, said Bakhtiar Uddin Chowdhury, officer-in-charge of Sonaimuri Police Station.

Ataur Rahman, also former vice-president of Awami League's Noakhali district unit, said supporters of the "boat" symbol have been threatening Shaheduzzaman since election day as he protested against vote rigging and illegal influence at the polling centre.

Contacted, Noakhali-2 MP-elect Morshed Alam refused the allegation. "I ordered the law enforcement agencies to find and arrest the killers."

OC Bakhtiar Uddin said, "The victim's family is yet to file a written complaint. Legal action will be taken after an investigation."

2 college students among 3 killed in road crashes

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Three people, including two college students, were killed in two separate road accidents in Nagarpur and Ghatail upazilas in Tangail yesterday.

In Nagarpur, two college students died on the spot when the motorcycle carrying them collided head-on with a truck on Sheikh Hasina Bridge in the Kederpur area due to dense fog and poor visibility in the early hours.

The deceased Shakil Ahmed, 19, of Shunshi village and Masum Miah, 19, of Kolmaid village, are both first-year students at Sauria Sayed Kalu Shah College in the adjacent Manikganj district.

Jaasim Uddin, officer-in-charge of Nagarpur Police Station, said that police seized the truck, but its driver managed to flee.

Their bodies were handed over to their families after completion of necessary legal procedures, he said.

In Ghatail upazila, a passenger of a human haulier was killed when the vehicle collided with a motorbike at Dhalapara in the morning.

Md Ali, 70, of Jaipata village, was seriously injured after the accident and died on the way to the Ghatail Upazila Health Complex.

Abdul Kuddus, in charge of the Dhalapara Police Outpost, said the victim's body was handed over to his family.

11 power plants mostly sat idle last fiscal

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In other words, the 11 plants were operating at less than 20 percent PLF, which is the ratio between the actual energy generated by the plant and the maximum possible energy that can be generated with the plant working at its rated power and for a duration of an entire year.

Even if a plant produces no electricity, it still gets its fixed costs. After dividing the total cost by the total power output, the unit price is fixed, which is higher for low output plants, Tamim said.

Save for Raj Lanka Power and United Mymensingh Power, the power plants sat idle for 80 percent of the time in the previous five fiscal years.

"If a power plant produces less than 20 percent of its capacity, there is no need for it in the area," Tamim added.

The PDB, which logged in record losses amounting to Tk 47,788 crore for fiscal 2022-23, did not disclose the capacity payments made in its annual report. It also did not give a breakdown of fixed costs and variable costs.

In fiscal 2022-23, the 11 plants were paid a total of Tk 220.5 crore by the PDB.

Summit Power referred the correspondent to the PDB spokesman for comment on Summit Barisal's low PLF. Bangla Trac and United Power could not be reached for comment.

The lower production by the 11 plants is due to the commissioning of the large power plants, said Shameem Hasan, spokesman for PDB.

Summit Barisal Power's low PLF is due to the commissioning of the Payra 1320MW thermal power plant in 2020, he said.

When asked about the capacity charges paid to the 11 plants, he said: "For now, we have to pay the capacity charges. The government must make a call on whether it wants to continue paying capacity charges in the future."

In principle, the PDB has cut back on purchasing electricity from high-cost power plants that burn furnace oil and diesel.

Overcapacity is one of the big concerns for the power sector, said Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director for the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

The reserve power generation capacity will exceed 50 percent by next year.

"This should be reduced," he said, adding that the existing contracts with the power plants should be reviewed and old, inefficient plants should be retired.

"All contracts must have the no-electricity-no-pay clause added in."

The macroeconomic challenges the country is facing at the moment are a result of the faulty import-dependent nature of the power and energy sector, Moazzem said.

"Bangladesh's energy generation model, especially the one used to purchase power from IPPs, is not only weakening the PDB but is also hurting the overall economy."

In an extraordinary measure, the government is set to issue Tk 14,000 crore worth of special bonds to clear mounting arrears to the IPPs thanks to the narrow fiscal space.

Moazzem also called for scrapping the Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provision) Act 2010, also known as the indemnity law for the power sector.

"Because of the indemnity law, the power purchase agreements are not transparent and we are not able to get competitive pricing. Because of the indemnity law, PDB has to buy expensive power," he added.

Power Cell Director General Mohammad Hossain, however, denied that the power sector's overcapacity is high.

"Overcapacity is not much as there are some power plants under maintenance and some are needed for peak hours."

The government counts many

abandoned or old power plants in calculating the overall capacity, which increases the number.

"But ultimately the overcapacity is more or less 20 percent, which is required."

Taming inflation

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Food price inflation was in double digits in October and November. It fell to 9.5 percent in December before rising again.

At Finance Minister Ali's formal reception at the Secretariat, Bangladesh Bank (BB) Governor Abdur Rouf Talukder said measures would be taken continuously until the point-to-point inflation came down to 6 percent.

The finance minister then held a meeting with the BB governor, finance secretary, chairman of the National Board of Revenue, and secretaries to the economic relations division and banking division.

After hearing about the challenges facing the economy, Minister Ali said, "I firmly believe we will overcome the challenges."

The Trading Corporation of Bangladesh will continue selling edible oil, lentils and sugar at subsidised prices, he said, adding that during Ramadan, which will begin in the second week of March, chickpeas and dates will also be sold by the corporation.

One crore families with welfare cards will be able to buy goods from the TCB.

He added that he would soon talk to his Indian counterpart so that supplies from the neighbouring country remain steady.

Titu said the devaluation of Taka against the dollar, Russia-Ukraine war, and the situation in the middle east caused the prices of essentials to rise.

The Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission will soon approve the formation of a commodities exchange board to increase the supply of goods.

Titu also pledged that the jute and leather sectors will get the government incentives that the apparel sector has been receiving exclusively.

No arsonists, masterminds will be spared

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Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at his mausoleum in Tungipara and exchange views with local AL leaders.

Kotalipara AL President Bhabendranath Biswas chaired yesterday's meeting. Sheikh Rehana, among others, was present there.

Hasina said no country can make progress without a democratic government or political leaders in power.

Although conspiracies were hatched to thwart the last parliamentary election, the people gave a befitting reply to the plotters by exercising their voting rights, she said.

The north shivers in biting cold

FROM PAGE 1

of rain on January 18, which will help clear out the fog and increase day temperatures. However, the night temperatures may drop further.

Yesterday, the country's lowest temperature was recorded at 8.5 degrees Celsius in Dinajpur.

Meanwhile, flight operations at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) were disrupted for around 13 hours yesterday due to fog.

Two international flights that failed to land in Dhaka were diverted to Kolkata, Executive Director of HSIA, Group Captain Mohammad Kamrul Islam, told The Daily Star.

He said flights could not operate normally from 8:20pm Saturday till 9:30am yesterday due to fog, adding that operations resumed after the visibility improved.

The diverted flights returned to the HSIA after the fog had cleared, said Kamrul.

According to the Met bulletin, moderate to thick fog may be seen over the country between midnight and morning and at places the fog may stay until noon.

Thanking the people for voting her party to power again, the PM said, "The January 7 election is the victory of the people and the democracy."

Hasina sought blessings from the countrymen so that she can run the state to fulfill their desire.

She urged the people to remain alert, as the anti-liberation elements who do not like the country's development are still plotting.

"We will move the country forward confronting all the conspiracies of the people, who don't want Bangladesh's development. We will build a poverty and hunger-free developed and prosperous Sonar Bangla as envisioned by Bangabandhu," she added.

Air, water and road communication may be disrupted temporarily due to the fog, it added.

It also said that night and day temperatures may rise slightly in some places but the cold spell is likely to continue in other places.

In Lalmonirhat and Kurigram, especially those living in the char areas near the Brahmaputra, Teesta, Dudhkumar, Gangadharand and Dharla rivers – have been bearing the brunt of the cold wave that has been sweeping over the north for the last few days.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Aupal Bhandra Sarkar, in charge of Kurigram's Rajarhat Meteorological Observatory, said he has not been able to join work in the field for the last few days due to severe cold and dense fog.

Apiar Mia, 52, a day labourer who lives on a char on the Teesta basin in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila, said, "We don't have the appropriate warm clothes for this weather. It is getting very difficult for low-income people like me to support our families in the

Greece rescues over 100 asylum seekers off Crete

AFP, Athens

The Greek coastguard yesterday said it had rescued 117 asylum-seekers sailing out of Libya, arresting three suspected smugglers.

The coastguard said the 84 men, two women and 31 minors were on board a 10-metre (33-foot) boat moored at a southern Crete bay used by fishermen.

The asylum seekers said they had sailed out of Tobruk, Libya on Thursday, heading for Italy, the authorities said in a statement.

Along with Italy, Greece has been on the frontlines of receiving migrants seeking to enter the European Union by crossing the Mediterranean from Turkey or North Africa.

face of such extreme cold weather." Echoing the same, Zahurul Islam, 52, of the same village, said, "We are not being able to go out and look for work. Many of us are having to borrow money to run our households."

Khadiza Bewa, 70, who lives in a village in Kurigram's Phulbari upazila, has been in urgent need of warm clothes and blankets. "But I can't afford those."

District Relief and Rehabilitation Office (DRRO) sources said around 30,000 blankets were distributed to the poor in five upazilas of Lalmonirhat, while around 43,000 were distributed in nine upazilas of Kurigram.

Meanwhile, a request for over one lakh blankets has been made to the ministry concerned.

Kurigram's DRRO Officer Abdul Hai Sarkar told The Daily Star that demand for blankets has been regular at the union level.

"Those suffering from the cold will find some relief if the blankets are distributed as per the people's demands."