

12th Jatiya Sangsad goes into 1st session

Shirin elected Speaker for fourth time in a row

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The 12th parliament went into its first session yesterday afternoon with a record 62 independent lawmakers, most of whom are Awami League leaders.

The House went into session at 3:00pm with deputy speaker Shamsul Haque Tuku in the chair.

Later, Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury was elected Speaker of the parliament for the fourth consecutive time, unopposed.

After being elected, the session was adjourned for 20 minutes and the Speaker went to the president's chamber in the parliament to take the oath, which was administered by President Mohammed Shahabuddin.

When Prime Minister and Leader of the House Sheikh Hasina entered the parliament chamber just before the session began, many MPs exchanged greetings with her.

Several ruling party and independent MPs were seen touching Hasina's feet and asking for blessings.

Kalyan Party Chairman and former army officer Syed Muhammad Ibrahim stood in front of the PM saluted her.

Around 80 diplomats including ambassadors of the US, UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, and India, were present at the parliament's maiden session.

WHO'S ON THE OPPOSITION

Jatiyo Party Chairman GM Quader took the first seat on the opposition benches as the Leader of the Opposition, with Anisul Islam Mahmud, the deputy leader of the opposition, sitting next to him.

The bench also consisted of JP MP Ruhul Amin Hawladar, independent MP Husamuddin, AL's expelled leader and independent MP Abdul Latif Siddiqui, Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon, AL Presidium member Shajahan Khan, former planning minister MA Mannan and former minister Ramesh Chandra Sen.



Lawmakers observe a one-minute silence at the first sitting of the 12th Jatiya Sangsad yesterday to express their profound respect to the departed souls of eminent personalities who died after the prorogation of 24th session of the last parliament. The House unanimously adopted a condolence motion.

PHOTO: PTD

MYANMAR CONFLICT

12 Rohingyas killed in military's shelling

Says UN human rights office as gunbattles between Arakan Army and military continue in Rakhine

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

At least 12 Rohingyas were killed and dozens injured in the Myanmar military's recent shelling of Rohingya villages, the UN Human Rights Office said in a statement yesterday, calling for the protection of the population from acts of genocide.

The statement came as fighting in various parts of the Southeast Asian country intensified and Arakan Army took control of the majority of the Rakhine State.

Armed rebel groups also took control of military camps and trade routes in the regions bordering China and India.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said three years after the military coup, Myanmar's ever-deteriorating human rights crisis is now in freefall, with insufficient world attention

paid to the misery and pain of its people.

Communications and internet services in some 74 townships, including most of the 17 townships in Rakhine, are experiencing partial, intermittent or total shutdowns.

Türk said the Rakhine State has been particularly hard hit since the fighting restarted there in November last year.

On January 26, fighting between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military reportedly left at least 12 Rohingya civilians dead and 30 others wounded in Hpon Nyo Leik village.

The Arakan Army allegedly positioned its troops in and around the Rohingya village anticipating the military's attacks.

The military repeatedly shelled the village, destroying its infrastructure, the statement said.

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2 killed, 5 hurt in Manipur violence

NDTV ONLINE

The cycle of violence in India's Manipur state continued yesterday with two people dying and at least five - including a top BJP youth leader from the state - getting injured in fresh firing between two groups.

Police sources said the exchange of fire broke out at Koutruk village in Imphal West district and that the number of deaths is likely to go up. At least one person is also said to be missing.

Manoharmayum Barish Sharma, a senior member of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha - the youth wing of the BJP - sustained injuries in the firing and has been rushed to a hospital.

The sources said the gunfight erupted between village volunteers of two communities on the border of the Imphal West and Kangpokpi districts.

There are also reports of residents fleeing the Kadangband, Koutruk and Kangchup villages in the Imphal valley following the fresh violence.

Last month, at least 13 people were killed in gun battles in Manipur's Tengnoupal district, close to the border with Myanmar.

POLITICAL PRISONERS

If not charged, those in prison should be freed

Says spokesperson for UN secretary-general

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The UN has said that people should never be jailed for expressing their political opinions.

"As a matter of principle, we believe that people should never be jailed for expressing their political opinion, and they should be released, especially if not charged," said Stéphane Dujarric, spokesperson for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, at a regular briefing yesterday.

He made the comment when asked if the UN secretary-general aligns with the UN Human Rights Commission's call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political activists in Bangladesh detained without charge or on charge in line with international human rights law.

BNP leaders have alleged that some 25,000 activists of the party were arrested ahead of the national polls on January 7.

Farmer trampled to death by elephants

UNB, Sherpur

A 65-year-old farmer died after reportedly being trampled by elephants in Jhenaigati upazila of Sherpur on Monday evening.

The deceased was identified as Nur Islam of the upazila's Taowakucha village.

Locals said that like every other day, farmer Nur went to the nearby hill to bring his cattle back, but didn't return home till 7:00pm.

Later, family members searched for him and found the body on a hill, they said, adding that there were marks of injuries that indicated he was trampled by elephants.

Jhenaigati Upazila Nirbahi Officer Abdullah Al-Mamun confirmed the matter, saying that the body was sent to the Sherpur Sadar Hospital morgue for autopsy.

The body would be handed over to the family upon completing legal procedures, he added.

N Korea fires cruise missiles in flurry of tests

AFP, Seoul

North Korea fired another round of cruise missiles yesterday, Seoul's military said, extending a recent flurry of tests of weapons that analysts warned could be destined for Russia's war in Ukraine.

This month, Pyongyang has conducted tests of what it called an "underwater nuclear weapon system", a solid-fuelled hypersonic ballistic missile, and a new generation of strategic cruise missiles.

Bangladesh fares worst in decade and half

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In 2001, when the TI included Bangladesh in the annual CPI, the country was ranked the lowest with a score of 0.4 out of 10 and held the same rank until 2005.

Bangladesh, however, improved until 2017 when it recorded its highest score, 28, and ranked 17th from the bottom.

But it stayed as 12th to 14th most corrupt country between 2018 and 2022.

The TI took into account data from eight international surveys on Bangladesh conducted between November 2020 and September 2023. No nationally generated data, including the TIB research, were taken into account.

The TI prepares the CPI based on the perception of corruption, mainly in the public sector, particularly bribery, the use of public office for private gain, diversion of public funds, nepotism in public sector appointments, red tape, and narrow vested interest groups indulging in policy capture.

At least 105 of 180 countries scored below the global average, which means 80 percent of the global population lives with a "very serious corruption problem".

Compared to the CPI of 2022, global scores have worsened with 63 countries' scores sliding, 62 retaining the same scores, and 55 improving.

Somalia was ranked as the most corrupt with a score of just 11 and Denmark remained the least corrupt country for the second year in a row with a score of 90.

BANGLADESH'S POOR SHOW

Citing the TI report, Itekhharuzzaman said Bangladesh scored fourth lowest among 31 Asia-Pacific countries, followed by Cambodia, 22, Afghanistan and Myanmar, 20, and North Korea, 17.

Bangladesh's score is lower than the average of any region, including Sub-Saharan Africa which had the lowest average of 33, he said.

Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the research and analysis division of the Economist Group, categorises each country into one of four regime types - full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid democracy, and authoritarian.

Bangladesh's score is lower than the average of authoritarian countries, 29, Itekhharuzzaman said.

"The main message of the CPI 2023 is that corruption and injustice are interrelated and they feed each other," Itekhharuzzaman said, adding that this creates a vicious circle.

"We can see such a vicious circle in our country too."

WHY THE POOR SHOW

The TIB executive director said the government had promised zero tolerance for corruption but no strategic initiatives were seen during the data period for CPI 2023.

The widespread public sector corruption intensified further, especially in public contracting and project implementation, he said, adding that there was no effective action against money laundering.

He said the state institutions mandated to control corruption, including the Anti-Corruption Commission, increasingly came under

political and bureaucratic influence, a key factor behind the protection and promotion of corruption.

Itekhharuzzaman said political and government positions were treated as a licence to abuse power.

He also mentioned policy capture for abuse by vested groups, sustained control and intimidation of the media and civil society as other reasons behind the poor show.

WAY FORWARD

Itekhharuzzaman said the impunity enjoyed by the corrupt should be challenged effectively and they, especially the powerful, should be brought to justice.

The depoliticisation of state institutions is needed to ensure professional integrity and independence, especially at the ACC, the bureaucracy, law enforcement agencies, and the judicial service, he said.

The strategically crucial sectors of public interest need to be salvaged from the clutches of policy capture, conflict of interest, and partisan political interest, he added.

He said freedom of the media, civil society and the people has to be ensured for unrestricted disclosure, reporting, and commenting on corruption.

He said a paradigm shift is needed in the political culture so that political and public positions are not treated as licences to have personal gains.

Responding to a question, Itekhharuzzaman said there was no scope for the report to be "politically motivated" as the CPI report is globally accepted and beyond any debate.

The party in power, whichever it

is, often terms TI's report "politically motivated" but never shies away from using it to target their political opponents, he said.

He said the country witnessed socio-economic progress but the extent of the progress could have been more and people would have got more benefits had corruption been controlled.

Sultana Kamal, chairperson of the TIB's board of trustees, said the government once again committed to zero tolerance for corruption after assuming power this month.

"If they remain honest about their commitment, we can hope for some improvements. But their previous work raises suspicion," she said.

GOVT PAYS NO HEED: QUADER
Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader yesterday said the government does not pay any heed to the CPI report, reports BSS.

He said the TIB is the BNP's agent and it says whatever the BNP says.

"This type of agency [TI] has some political interest. These agencies protect the interests of some groups or some countries ...," he told a press conference at the Awami League president's Dhanmondi political office.

Quader, also the AL general secretary, said the TI announces such indexes to protect someone's interest and the agency did it in the past too.

"Corruption is the way of life across the world now and it is not a matter of Bangladesh only."

"Corruption is found more or less around the world but the way Bangladesh is being blamed is not fair at all," he added.

Obstructed in different parts of the country

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"Their application seeking permission was not granted considering the law and order situation. We dispersed the BNP men and detained 8-10 people from the area for interrogation," he told journalists.

The demonstration in Uttara was organised yesterday, the day of the first sitting of the new parliament, as part of the BNP's countrywide black flag march programme demanding Jatiya Sangsad, which the BNP call a dummy House, be dissolved and fresh national polls be held under a non-party interim government.

The BNP boycotted the January 7 national polls saying free and fair polls are not possible under the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The party secured police permission to take out black flag marches from

seven venues - Motijheel, New Market, Jatrabari and Sutrapur, Shahjadpur, Uttara, and Mirpur. However, it could not hold a single march as police barred the party men from gathering at the venues.

In Motijheel, a huge number of police were deployed to prevent BNP leaders and activists from gathering in the Pirjangi Shah Mazar area.

Around 2:30pm, BNP standing committee member Gayeshwar Chandra Roy told journalists that police obstructed the party activists from convening at the venue.

"Our party men will be arrested unnecessarily. They cannot gather. We strongly protest police restrictions," he said.

The BNP leader said they had informed the DMP commissioner about yesterday's programme, but

nine party men were arrested in Azimpur.

The party's black flag march programmes were also foiled in at least seven other districts - Barisal, Patuakhali, Pirojpur, Jhenidah, Naogaon, Manikganj, and Tangail.

In Patuakhali, police used truncheons on BNP leaders and activists when they took out a black flag march from Swanirbhar Road area, leaving at least 10 party activists injured.

Police claimed they dispersed the BNP activists to keep traffic movement normal.

In Barishal, two city BNP leaders were arrested in the Barishal Press Club area while preparing for a black flag march. A large number of police personnel obstructed marches in several areas of the city, said a BNP

leader.

Addressing a human chain programme in front of the Jatiya Press Club in Dhaka yesterday morning, Gayeshwar said only the "shameless persons" will participate in the first session of parliament.

"Our movement is going on... You cannot stop the people [from waging the movement] by using the police," he added.

Meanwhile, BNP Senior Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi last night said more than 50 party leaders and activists were detained by police in Dhaka, Tangail, Kishoreganj, Khulna, and Chattogram during the demonstrations yesterday.

More than 100 party men were injured in "police attacks" until 6:35pm, he said at a press conference at party's Nayapaltan central office.

He exchanged

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they, as employees, were not responsible for what the owners of the outlets did.

The minister said, "You should also write about the [media] owners' history. You don't write what is true. You know it all, but don't write about the real truth."

Some reporters spread "misinformation for money or just a shot of liquor," he alleged.

"They do not consider that misinformation hurts people. If there is a genuine basis, write about anything. There is no problem. I am not asking you not to write about me if I commit a criminal act."

Muktadir was elected MP from Brahmanbaria-3 constituency in the January 7 polls.

Referring to a report published in The Daily Star over seven years ago, he said the report alleged that he had a role in the attacks on six villages of Hindu people on October 30, 2016.

"I was once a victim of misinformation about Nasiragar, and I was once a victim of misinformation about Helafate-Islam. The media wrote whatever they wanted."

"I challenged Mahfuz Anam [The Daily Star editor and publisher]. I told him I was ready to accept any punishment if your paper could prove what it had published against me. Either you publish [what I say in] protest or stand in court."

Claiming that newspapers like The Daily Star and Prothom Alo do not publish rejoinders in full, he said, "But The Daily Star published every word of my rejoinder because there was no option. You can't go very far by telling lies. People cannot be misled by misinformation. People suffer damages because of misinformation."

A reporter of this newspaper, present at the briefing, told the minister about The Daily Star's policy of publishing rejoinders in its entirety. The reporter also informed the minister that the paper published his rejoinder along with the paper's reply.

The minister said, "If you want to challenge me, I am ready to accept it. I had no involvement in the incident [Nasiragar attack]. If you blame me for this, it will be a blatant lie."

Muktadir then heavily criticised two reporters of The Daily Star for the report headlined "Attack on Hindus in Brahmanbaria: Ambition, not religion."

In the investigative report, the paper wrote that the attacks were instigated for political gains and the issue of religious sentiment was secondary. The reporters talked to about 100 people and prepared the report.

Yesterday, the minister said the reporters did it after being "influenced by someone".

"I have told your editor what influenced them. He did not publish the rejoinder for four days. But it [rejoinder] was published after I talked with the

editor. I told the editor that I will drag you to the court. A lie is always a lie, it cannot be turned into the truth."

"It does not matter what the reply [to the rejoinder] was. These two [reporters] are no longer with The Daily Star... It's clear that they had made the report after being influenced in some way."

"They wrote the report after taking money, which is unfortunate. I had no involvement with the incident... I will quit politics if anyone can prove that I had even a distant link with the Nasiragar incident."

The minister did not present evidence to support his claim.

One of the two reporters the minister talked about is still working for the paper. The other one left the newspaper in 2018.

According to The Daily Star report the new minister talked about, the reporters of this newspaper talked to over 100 locals of Nasiragar who are "convinced" that political ambition of a ruling Awami League lawmaker played a big role behind the attacks on Hindu neighbourhoods.

"As they allege, the plan for the October 30 mayhem stemmed from bitter rivalries between two Awami League stalwarts in Brahmanbaria politics. One is a minister and the other a lawmaker. If the minister can be forced to quit, opportunity would open up for the lawmaker to climb up the political ladder and even become a minister."

"Everyone - from farmers to politicians to top district officials - is aware of the toxic relations of the two - Sayedul Haque, 74, a five-time lawmaker and minister of fisheries, and Obaidul Muktadir Chowdhury, 61, a former bureaucrat-turned politician," reads the report.

In reply to the rejoinder Muktadir sent, The Daily Star wrote, "Two police probe committees - one formed by the Police Headquarters and the other by Brahmanbaria district police - investigated the attack by the religious zealots, and both found internal conflict of local Awami League was a major reason behind the attack, and that finding has already been published."

"The attack took place following an internal conflict of the local AL over establishing supremacy," Deputy Inspector General of Police of Chittagong Range Shakhwat Hossain, who headed the probe body formed by the Police Headquarters, told The Daily Star in Brahmanbaria.

Moreover, additional superintendent of police in Brahmanbaria, who headed the probe body formed by the office of superintendent of police (SP) in Brahmanbaria said, "There were several elements involved in the attack but it was the internal conflict of the local ruling party, in which one group tried to discredit the other, was a leading element."