

Ensure fair legal process for political detainees

US urges Bangladesh

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The US has urged the Bangladesh government to ensure a fair and transparent legal process for political activists arrested ahead of the national elections.

State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said this at a briefing in Washington DC on Tuesday when asked what steps the US was taking against the Bangladesh government for undermining democracy.

The journalist also referred to the UN Human Rights Commission's calls for the immediate release of the political activists in Bangladesh detained ahead of the polls.

According to the BNP, the government has arrested some 25,000 opposition members, including BNP leaders, to manipulate the January 7 election.

Miller said, "We also urge the Bangladeshi government to allow opposition members and media professionals, civil society representatives, to participate meaningfully in the country's democratic process and civic life, and we will continue to engage with the Bangladesh government to advance that point of view."

He added that the US spoke about its concerns about the parliamentary elections in Bangladesh before as they did not find them to be free and fair. The US also expressed concerns with the arrest of thousands of political opposition members in the run-up to those elections.

The spokesperson said democracy advances peace, prosperity, and security, and it is at the centre of the US foreign policy.

"We continue to engage with the Bangladeshi government to advance democratic principles, which are the key to ensuring peace and prosperity for all Bangladeshis."



President of the Saudi Shura Council Abdullah Mohammed Ibrahim Al-Sheikh calls on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Gono Bhaban yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

ICJ rejects most of Kyiv's 'terror' case against Russia

AFP, The Hague

The United Nations' top court yesterday mostly rejected Ukraine's claims that Russia was financing "terrorism" in eastern Ukraine, saying only that Moscow had failed to investigate alleged breaches.

Kyiv had accused Moscow of being a "terrorist state" whose support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine was a harbinger of the full-fledged 2022 invasion.

It wanted Russia to compensate all civilians caught up in the conflict, as well as victims from Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, which was shot down over eastern Ukraine.

But the International Court of Justice (ICJ) tossed out most of Ukraine's pleas, ruling only that Russia was "failing to take measures to investigate facts... regarding persons who have allegedly committed an offence."

The ICJ "rejects all other submissions made by the Ukraine," it said in a statement. This case predates Russia's 2022

invasion of Ukraine. The ICJ will decide on Friday whether it has jurisdiction to rule in a separate case over that war.

The court said that only cash transfers could be considered as support for alleged terrorist groups under the terms of the international convention on terrorism financing.

This "does not include the means used to commit acts of terrorism, including weapons or training camps," the court ruled.

"Consequently, the alleged supply of weapons to various armed groups operating in Ukraine... fall outside the material scope of the ICSFT" convention, said the court.

Russia was also in the dock for alleged breaches of an international convention on racial discrimination due to its treatment of the Tatar minority and Ukrainian speakers in occupied Crimea.

Here the court found that Russia had not taken sufficient measures to enable education in Ukraine.

RED SEA CRISIS

Yemen's Houthis fire missiles at US warship

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen's Houthi rebels fired "several" missiles at a US warship in the Red Sea, they said yesterday, hours after the US military reported shooting down a missile.

"The naval forces of the Yemeni Armed Forces, with the help of God Almighty, fired several... naval missiles at the American destroyer USS Gravelly in the Red Sea," the Houthi statement said.

Earlier, US Central Command said the USS Gravelly shot down a Houthi missile at about 11:30 pm (2030 GMT) on Tuesday -- the latest in a series of such incidents in the Red Sea.

"Iranian-backed Houthi militants fired one anti-ship cruise missile from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen toward the Red Sea," a Centcom statement said.

Rain likely in Dhaka, Khulna divisions

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD) forecasts varied weather patterns across the country, with rain or thundershowers expected in several divisions, including Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Barishal, and Chattogram.

As per the Met office's weather forecast for 72 hours from 9:00am yesterday, rain or thundershowers are likely at a few places in the Khulna and Dhaka divisions, with intermittent showers predicted in Rajshahi, Barishal, and Chattogram divisions.

In other parts of Bangladesh, the weather is expected to remain mainly dry, with partly cloudy skies.

Dismembered remains found stuffed in suitcase

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

Police yesterday afternoon discovered the dismembered remains of an unidentified woman stuffed inside a suitcase in Brahmanbaria.

The suitcase was recovered from a pond in Ramrail union of Sadar upazila.

The victim, yet to be identified, is presumed to be in her mid 20s, said Saiful Islam, sub inspector of Brahmanbaria Sadar Model Police Station.

The police have sent her remains to the Sadar hospital morgue for autopsy.

8 arrested over murder of former UP chairman

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pirojpur

Law enforcers yesterday arrested eight people, including the main accused, in a case filed over the killing of a former union parishad chairman in Pirojpur.

Of them, Rab arrested four in Bagerhat's Mollahat upazila around noon, said Rabiul Islam, deputy director of Rab 8, in a press conference in Barishal city.

They are Atghor Kuriana Union Parishad Chairman and the prime accused, Mithun Howladar, 44, and his followers, Sushmoy Halder, 18, Jalis Mahmud, 24, and Aminul Islam, 23.

The rest were arrested in Pirojpur's Nesarabad upazila. They are Sankar Sarker, 42, Taposh Mazumder, 50, Shwadhin Halder, 30, and Babul Howladar, 55.

On Tuesday, Shekhar Kumar Sikdar, former chairman of Atghor Kuriana union, was beaten to death. Subsequently, his wife, Mala Sikder, filed a case against 15 named and 10-12 unnamed people.

The victim's younger brother, Sankar Kumar Sikder, alleged that police were there when the murder took place but did nothing to prevent it.

Locals nervy as fighting goes on in Myanmar

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"There is a BGP [Border Guard Police of Myanmar] camp near our house. Feeling insecure, I have sent my mother to a relative's house in Bandarban," he added.

Syed Alam, another local resident, said shooting happens quite frequently across the border. "Sometimes it happens suddenly. Where will we go? Even if you are afraid, you have to stay here."

Meanwhile, Bandarban Deputy Commissioner Shah Mozahid Uddin and Superintendent of Police Saikat Shaheen visited the Ghumdhum border area yesterday.

Quoting locals, the DC said sounds of around 18 mortar shell explosions were heard from across the border over the last three days since Sunday.

"A mortar shell landed near the house of one Abdur Rahim close to the 'zero line' on the border. Sounds of gunfire were heard in the evening [Tuesday evening] as well," he told reporters at the Ghumdhum Union Parishad yesterday.

The DC said law enforcers and the administration are on alert to tackle any situation. There is no security risk now, he added.

"SSC exams are close. I visited two schools and found the situation quite normal as the students are attending classes. However, if an emergency arises, we will move an exam centre. Efforts are underway to make sure that people don't panic."

SP Saikat said discussions have been held with all the authorities concerned to maintain a law and order. "The law enforcement agencies and the BGB are active."

When the officials were about to leave the border area yesterday, gunshots were heard again.

Naikhongchhari UNO Mohammad Zakaria, and Ghumdhum UP Chairman AKM Jahangir Aziz were also present during the DC's visit to the border area.

About the transit camps in Ghumdhum, DC Mujahid said the camps were handed over to the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission for temporary use.

Repatriation of Rohingya will begin as per the instructions of the foreign ministry, he added.

Amid gas crisis, 2 gas-run power plants firing up

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power stations -- were approved in 2019 for generation by 2022. The three plants' combined capacity is 1,885MW.

Apart from these three independent power producers, PDB itself has two gas-fired plants under construction -- Ghorashal Repowering Stations Unit 3 and 4 -- that are 97 percent and 95 percent complete, according to the progress report of PDB.

At present, gas-fired power plants account for 10,712MW of the total installed capacity of 25,481MW and their combined demand for gas is 1,969 million cubic feet per day (mmcf/d).

In the best-case scenario, Petrobangla, the state agency that supplies gas, can provide 1,000 mmcf/d of gas to the power plants from its total supply of 3,500 mmcf/d. But at present, Petrobangla's total supply is 2,500 mmcf/d, of which gas-fired power stations are getting 700 mmcf/d.

Though gas is the cheapest fuel, the country is now able to produce around 3,500-4,000MW from gas out of the total generation of 9,500MW to 10,500MW.

Only in 2026 will the gas supply increase adequately thanks to the drilling of new gas wells and long-term LNG import deals, according to Petrobangla's plans.

Against this backdrop, it is not clear where the 322 mmcf/d of gas to power Meghnaghat's turbines is going to come from.

Petrobangla Chairman Zanendra Nath Sarker and Titas Gas Managing Director Haronur Rashid Mullah could not be reached for comment despite repeated attempts.

Asked how PDB would ensure adequate gas supply for the new plants, Khandaker Mokammel Hossain, member (generation) of PDB, said: "We still have no plan on how to increase the gas supply -- we need more discussions with the other stakeholders."

Anupam Hayat, the chief financial officer of Unique Meghnaghat Power, is confident that their plant will get an adequate gas supply due to its fuel economy.

"Our plant produces electricity with up to 65 percent efficiency whereas most of the other gas-fired power plants, both private and government-owned, operate at only 35 to 40 percent efficiency. That means we would be able to produce more electricity than the others with the same amount of gas and our unit cost would be lower too."

Subsequently, it makes most sense for the authorities to ensure maximum gas supply to Unique Meghnaghat, which has signed a gas supply agreement with Titas Gas.

"NLDC [the National Load Dispatch Centre] goes for merit-based demand and we are confident that we will be on the top of that list," Hayat added.

Unique Meghnaghat was producing electricity on a trial basis between January 4 and 20.

Its gas supply was stopped on January 20, when the country abruptly faced a severe gas shortage as the Moheshkhalhi Floating LNG terminal run by Excelerate Energy delayed resuming operations and the Summit LNG terminal, the other floating storage regasification unit (FSRU) in Bangladesh, ran out of cargo.

While Excelerate Energy's FSRU is operating as normal, Unique Meghnaghat's gas supply is yet to be resumed.

On the other hand, Summit Meghnaghat II is facing no such issue, as per Summit Power's email response to The Daily Star.

"We are happy to announce gas has been provided now and the Summit Meghnaghat II is in 'commissioning' mode, generating electricity as per the NLDC and BPDB instructions. We expect this most efficient power plant to provide 583 MW of electricity during summer at least cost," it added.

Summit Power, which is the largest IPP in the country with 12 power plants in operation and shares in at least two more, received the highest share of the capacity payments: Tk 12,130 crore.

Ranjan Lohar, the chief executive officer of Reliance Bangladesh LNG and Power, could not be reached for comment.

In the last couple of years, the government only increased the power generation capacity but did not allocate enough budget to ensure energy supply to those power plants, said M Shamsul Alam, dean of the faculty of engineering at Daffodil International University.

"Because of such a policy, the electricity production cost is increasing day by day as more power plants' capacity remain unused and they are getting capacity charges for days."

Subsequently, huge amounts of subsidies are required in the sector. "Besides, in the name of subsidy reduction, the government is planning to put the additional burden on the consumers' shoulders," said Alam, also the senior vice-president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh.

The decision to award CODs to gas-fired power plants amid the ongoing gas crisis is "adding salt to the wound" as it will increase the burden of both PDB and the consumers, said Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

"Already, PDB is struggling to pay the dues of existing power plants. The government has to issue special bonds and print money to pay the deferred payments."

The fallacious policy will increase the overcapacity burden, too, he said.

"When the contracts were signed, there was overcapacity and the CPD

had raised concerns then too. If the government had good intentions, they might retire the old, inefficient power plants first and then allow the new power plants. That has not happened and this indicates that the government always favours a group of beneficiaries in this sector," Moazzem added.

The country saw its highest generation of 15,648 MW in a day in April last year. This upcoming summer, there is a target to generate 17,800 MW.

Injustice

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include reducing economic inequality, ensuring good governance, improving democracy and proportional elections, protecting the environment and mitigating climate change impact, introducing village parishad, reducing regional disparity and decentralisation of development, improving social harmony, putting special attention to women, children and the young generation, universal military education, and protecting national resources and enacting a neutral foreign policy.

On the 10 tasks, Prof Rehman said, "... All these relate to the symptoms of a highly unjust society. Each of these interventions is then attempting to address various forms of injustice..."

Speaking at the event, Prof Rounaq Jahan, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), highlighted the country's biggest challenge as political divisions.

"The political divide is a significant problem here that needs to be addressed ... Besides, inequality is also an overarching issue, and it has become very prominent now," she said, attributing this inequality to politics.

Regarding good governance, Prof Jahan emphasised the necessity of addressing the political aspect.

"If we cannot free institutions from breaking down or administration from politicisation, it would not be possible to ensure good governance in the country," she added.

In his lecture, Prof Nazrul highlighted the significant rise in economic disparity in the country. "First, there has been a sharp increase in income inequality in Bangladesh over the years. Secondly, a comparison with the rest of the world shows that such a massive increase in inequality was not necessary for development," he said.

Presided over by Binayak Sen, director general at the BIDS, Mashur Rahman, economic affairs adviser to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Kazi Iqbal, research director at the BIDS, Prof Mustafizur Rahman, CPD distinguished fellow, and Prof MM Akash of the Economics department at Dhaka University spoke at the event among others.

Imran's hope

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Pakistan prepares for an election on Feb. 8. It was not immediately clear if the two sentences for Khan would run concurrently.

"Another sad day in our judicial system history, which is being dismantled," Khan's media team said, repeating his denial of the charges.

"No cross-questioning allowed, no final argument concluded and decision pops up like a pre-determined process in play ... this ridiculous decision will also be challenged."

Khan's lawyer, Intezar Panjutha, told Reuters: "It is a sham verdict."

Khan and his wife were charged with illegally selling gifts, worth more than 140 million rupees (\$501,000), received during his 2018-2022 premiership from a state treasury known locally known as the "Toshakhana".

Government officials have alleged Khan's aides sold the gifts in Dubai.

A list of these gifts shared by a former information minister included perfumes, diamond jewellery, dinner sets and seven watches, six of them Rolex -- the most expensive being a "Master Graff limited edition" valued at 85 million rupees (\$304,000).

Khan was also handed a three-year prison sentence in August for the same charge by another court, but that sentence had been suspended on appeal.

Imran Khan had vowed to lead the

Some justice

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In a gesture of gratitude, Nahid's father Niamul Hossain and mother Monwara Hossain embraced their lawyers Aneek R Haque and Bakir Uddin Bhuiyan, who fought the case pro bono.

After passing the order, Justice Naima even called the victim, who was 10 at the time of the accident, to the bench and gave him chocolates and blessings.

"Study hard and become a big officer in the future. Do come visit us when we're older, we'll be waiting," she told the child.

Yakub was ordered to deposit the money through two separate Fixed Deposit Receipts in Nahid's account with Al Arafah Islami Bank's Jatrabari Branch in April and December this year. The monthly Tk 7,000 will also have to be paid to that account.

Nahid can withdraw the money for his education every month and can withdraw the FDR with interest after 10 years, the HC bench said.

The court, meanwhile, asked the victim's father not to proceed with the case he filed with the lower court concerned for compensation from the workshop owner, Deputy Attorney General Amit Das Gupta and Niamul's lawyer Aneek R Haque told The Daily Star.

country a second time after being ousted as prime minister in 2022, but the two lengthy prison sentences in a week have put paid to his chances -- for now at least.

VERDICT 'KARMA', SAY OPPONENTS

Yesterday's verdict followed an investigation by the country's top anti-graft body, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).

Bushra's conviction was an attempt to pressurise Khan further, PTT's acting chairman and lawyer Gohar Ali Khan said in a television interview. "Bushra Bibi has no link to this case," he said. While Khan has been found guilty in the other two cases, this is the first sentencing for his wife. The two were married in 2018, months before Khan ascended to premiership for the first time. It was Khan's third marriage after two divorces.

A prosecution team member, speaking to Reuters on the condition of anonymity, confirmed the verdict. A detailed verdict would be released soon, he said. Local broadcaster Geo News reported that the verdict also came with a hefty fine.

Khan's earlier conviction on the selling of state gifts charge resulted in a five-year ban from holding public office, ruling the 71-year-old out of the Feb 8 election. Yesterday's verdict, however, means that he will be ineligible to hold office until he is 81.

The bench delivered the verdict after hearing a rule issued earlier over compensating the victim's family.

Yakub Hossain and Nahid's family were asked to submit compliance reports before the HC every three months.

Nahid's father Niamul, a shoe trader in Brahmanbaria's Ashuganj upazila, had lost his job during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

He then began working at Noor Engineering Workshop in Bhairab along with his wife and son. Soon after, in a freak accident, Nahid lost his right arm while working.

Following a report published on Bangla daily Prothom Alo, Nahid's father filed a writ petition with the HC, seeking directives on the authorities concerned to ensure adequate compensation for his family.

The HC on December 27, 2022, issued a rule asking the workshop owner to explain why he should not be directed to give Tk 2 crore to the family, who alleged that the accident occurred as Yakub had forced Nahid, who was just a child, to work on a drill machine -- a hazardous equipment.

Senior lawyer Md Qamrul Islam represented Yakub during the court hearing.